Make Mine Monster

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Make Mine Monster

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Summary

While out fishing one day, Will comes across an unusual creature who seems to adore him immediately.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1

Will stood deathly still in the water as it gently moved around him, only minorly obstructed by his presence. Ahead of him, his line and lure bobbed in the water, waiting for a fish to come upon it and decide it looked delicious enough.

Fishing was one of the things Will was incredibly good at. He started at a young age when fishing wasn't done for fun but rather because that was the only way he and his father could have food on the table for the night. As an adult, though, Will fished more because it relaxed him. Standing in the water with the rest of the world finally so quiet around him, the only sounds coming from the trickling as the water passed him, he was finally at peace. Or what could come closest to peace for Will Graham.

The outside world was loud and chaotic, filled with so much darkness. It was the darkness which Will was drawn to, which called him. The closest he ever allowed himself to come, though, to that alluring, chanting darkness, was when he caught the killers who bathed in it.

Will worked for the FBI at Quantico as a professor, but now and then, someone would bring him in to consult on cases. The usual culprit was Jack Crawford, the head of the Behavioral Science Unit and one of the most stubborn and persistent people Will had ever met in his life. Jack wasn't good at taking no for an answer, especially when that meant that people could die. Truthfully, saving lives wasn't the reason Will ultimately agreed. The closest he could come to embracing his own darkness was when he explored the minds of other killers, putting together the pieces of their darkness they left behind. Will was excellent at what he did, taking what looked to be several disjointed pieces of a puzzle without the picture on the front of the box and fitting them together in his own mind.

But for each killer whose mind he explored, he let them into his own at the same time. They stayed there, traipsing around the deepest, darkest parts of him. Some faded eventually, but Will felt like he was drifting, lost in the minds of those he caught for a while now. Each time, they took a little piece of him with them, making it harder for Will to distinguish where they ultimately ended, and he began. His work chipped away at him, and yet he kept going back, needing to be close to the one thing he didn't think he could ever embrace.

That was the reason Will fished.

The only time his mind was truly his own was in the quiet of the stream. Nothing around him mattered as he stood in the water, feeling it lick at the back of his legs through his waders. It didn't matter if he was physically in the water or listening to Jack berate him over the next killer they had to catch. All he had to do was tilt his head back, close his eyes, and wade into the quiet of the stream.

Now, however, that quiet was very real and not just within the confines of his own mind.

Around him, a light breeze ruffled the trees as he drew his line back, readying to cast it again. Sometimes, he brought his pack with him to fish. The dogs would lie on one side of the stream, content to watch him as he fished. Sometimes, they would even jump in and try to

fish on their own. Will loved having his dogs with him, but he only ever brought them in warm weather. The days had begun to cool off, though, and cold water combined with cold air would not do well for the only family Will ever truly claimed.

His father tried his best; Will knew this. But it was difficult for him. His father could never relate to him, even though Will could relate to everyone around him, his father included. They moved from place to place a lot during Will's childhood, making it difficult for Will to establish friendships with anyone or even relationships in later years. Together, he and his father moved up and down the length of the Mississippi while his father fixed various boats and found odd jobs here and there. He was the one who taught Will how to fish, a skill he used now.

The water trickled around him as Will recast his line, watching the lure as it cut through the air and dropped once again into the water.

His father once told him that the best way to ensure a catch was to name the lure after something or someone important. It was to ensure that something would be caught and that if something came back, it meant the person treasured the fisher too.

Will, though, had no one precious enough to name a lure after.

He had friends, in a way. The people he worked with, namely Jimmy Price and Brian Zeller, found him strange and off-putting. Will often found himself in odd arguments with them as they tried to piece together in their own way what Will had managed in his. Another of his coworkers, Beverly Katz, was really the only person he worked with that he could consider his friend. Of all of them, she was the most accepting and strangely the most honest of them. Will felt somewhat comforted that he didn't need to dive into her mind to learn what she was thinking; she would just say it outright. It was a welcome reprieve from navigating hidden meanings and minds, not his own.

The only other people he could have possibly considered his friends were Jack and Dr. Alana Bloom.

Will had met Alana a few years prior and instantly found her charming and beautiful. For a while, he had longed to take their relationship further, but every time anything like it came up, Alana shut him down, citing over and over his instability.

In the water, however, Will never felt unstable. Even if the whole world was adrift around him, he was steady, waiting patiently to lure what would ultimately be his dinner.

He didn't know how long he had been in the water, though his previous catch was currently dangling from his belt. He wanted to catch one more fish, enough for a few meals, rather than come back, or worse, go to a grocery store and be bombarded by the thoughts of everyone wandering the isles.

Somewhere off to the side, a twig snapped, the first loud sound in Will's otherwise quiet world. He didn't think much of it, though.

Where he lived, it wasn't unusual for animals to pass through while feeding, and it wasn't odd to come across the random person or two, usually on their way back from their own fishing trip. Will didn't bother to turn toward the noise, instead watching his lure ahead of him.

He stared ahead of him even as leaves rustled around him, eyes glued to where he saw a dark shape moving through the water. Eventually, he felt a tug on his line, and he drew it back, a satisfied smirk on his face as he lifted the squirming fish out of the water.

It took him only a few seconds to secure the fish to his belt, but when he looked up, he caught a glimpse of something massive in the trees.

Will couldn't help but look at it a little closer, first seeing antlers and then the distinct outline of a deer's body.

Will cocked his head, watching the deer who watched him back from the trees. It was usual that an animal would come so close to a human; the deer was nearly on the edge of the stream where the trees bordered the water, though it wasn't unusual for animals without prior knowledge of humans not to know the danger. While Will fished, he was never one for the hunt. At least not when it came to animals. Will's hunts were limited to human monsters, those he could track and find with government approval to keep him from being the person hunted.

The deer's head seemed to turn, mimicking the movement of his own head.

Will straightened, and the deer straightened with him, not one looking elsewhere. Will tilted his head to the other side, and the deer followed the movement, turning its head with his. Will righted himself again, watching as the deer followed. He smiled slightly. Of all the usual things he could come across while fishing, it was a hyper-intelligent deer who seemed to enjoy mimicking him. At least that's what he thought until the deer drew its lips back too, mimicking him once again.

That was usual.

Will turned full, facing the odd creature in front of him, and as he did, it stepped further toward the edge of the stream, leaving the cover of the trees.

Immediately, Will knew there was something *off* about the creature in front of him. This creature had feathers decorating its whole body rather than the usual short, thick fur of a deer. The feathers shined in the afternoon sun, sending flashes of light around it as it stepped closer to Will.

Then, Will heard a snap, much like the same snapping of twig he heard before, and in the span of a blink, the deer was gone and replaced by something completely different.

Where the deer had once stood before now stood a massive creature that almost looked like a man. It had inky black skin, the same color as the deer's feathers, but it didn't shine in the sunlight. On its head were a massive pair of antlers, exactly like the dear. It had long, clawed fingers, and while it stood on two legs, the creature's legs didn't end with normal feet. Instead, there were hooves, much like the deer. It looked starved, Will could count the ribs in

its chest, and its stomach was sunken in. But none of that caught Will's attention as much as the creature's white eyes. It had no irises, but Will knew it was staring at him, watching him as it had before.

The creature cocked its head to one side, straightened, then tilted to the other side, then straightened again before pulling back its thin, black lips and revealing a mouth full of fangs.

Will couldn't help but yelp and stumble backward, his brain finally catching up with what he was seeing in front of him.

The creature blinked at him then mimicked what he had done before, ending once again in what Will assumed was a smile. Or maybe it was a threat, and the creature had found its newest meal.

He didn't wait to find out which it was, dragging himself from the water as his heart pounded in his ears. Will scrambled up the bank on the other side of the stream, running toward the cooler he had brought with him. By the time he reached it though and looked over his shoulder while one hand searched for a weapon, the creature was gone, leaving no evidence of its presence in its wake. At least not anything that Will could see.

Will's heart hammered in his chest as he practically dropped next to his cooler, staring at the spot the creature had once occupied.

Had he truly seen it? Was that even real?

It wouldn't have been the first time Will hallucinated something around him. He could conjure killers into his mind, his imagination running wild with what his senses told him. It shouldn't surprise him that he would conjure some strange, sinister being.

But never before had he thought up something like that. Something so inhuman. Each of the monsters he visualized were always still people at their core, even if they were faceless.

This was something else.

Or he was going insane.

Will unhooked the fish, dropping them into the cooler before he stood. Then, he moved back toward the stream, following the path of his own footsteps from his scramble. The footsteps led him to the edge of the water, and Will stepped back into it, feeling the chill of it sink into legs through the waders. His eyes scanned the trees, looking for any sign of dark antlers or, worse, the creature that they were attached to. But he saw nothing.

He waded closer to the other bank, feeling the water resist him the whole way as though something was trying to pull him away from what he would find on the other side.

Will hoped it would be nothing. He hoped he would find dirt undisturbed and that everything he had just seen — what had he just seen? — was just his imagination.

Yet when he approached the other bank, he could see the distinct outline of hoofprints. He drew near, seeing first a set of four that looked like it could belong to a deer and then a pair of

hoofprints closer to the shore. Will reached for them, his fingers finding the indents in the dirt before launching himself backwards into the cold water.

Real.

It was real.

Will forced himself out of the water, rushing to grab what little he brought with him before practically sprinting back to his house. He was through the door so quickly; the dogs barely had time to react to his return until Will slammed the door shut behind him. The dogs sniffed him, sneezing at the smell of the stream on his clothes. Will, however, had completely forgotten about his fall into the water, all too focused on the pounding in his chest and the sight of white eyes.

Eventually, he forced himself away from the door, making certain to lock it and then check the lock twice. Then he moved to each window, checking lock after lock, and then eventually the back door. Then, he lit a fire in his chimney, listening to abnormal sounds from it that would indicate something trying to climb down.

However, the world around him was still and seemingly unaware of the encounter Will had just experienced.

It took him a while to remember the fish in his cooler, but once he was sure that there was nothing outside the house, he finally returned to the fish, first gutting them and then setting one aside to use later. The other he cooked while the dogs danced around him, still sneezing at his now dried clothes. Will took those off while fish cooked, taking a moment to wash himself off in the sink before finding new clothes. He didn't bother with anything fancy, knowing he would soon be going to sleep.

He had no one to impress; no one would judge him.

He only had his dogs, and unlike people, they never judged.

Several hours and a few glasses of whiskey later, Will had forgotten all about the strange encounter earlier that day. He let the dogs out, whistling them to stay close in the dark of the night. While animals tended to stay away, coyotes weren't as easily deterred from a meal as herbivores were from roaming. He searched the trees around him, at first out of curiosity as his dogs did their business, then out of wariness.

Will couldn't help but feel like something was watching him from the shadow of the trees.

Will thought of the creature earlier and how it watched him in the water before mimicking his movements.

The creature didn't move to attack him then, but Will wondered if that was because it was daytime. Even with humans, the killers came out to play at night.

Will whistled for his dogs, who tumbled over themselves, trying to reach him first before swamping his legs, tails thumping happily. Whatever Will felt watching him hadn't caught

their attention, and Will tried to reassure himself that he was paranoid.

He took his time greeting each dog, petting them gently while they sniffed him, evidently preferring the scent of him now over his earlier stream-water smell. Will chuckled to himself before he opened the door, letting the dogs plow over each other to enter the house.

Once the last one was in, Will looked over his shoulder, searching the tree line again but like before; he saw nothing.

He stepped back through his door, eyes still scanning, before he shut the front door behind him, resolved to forget the strange occurrence earlier that day.

When he finally went to sleep, Will dreamt of white eyes and fanged smiles, but he woke unharmed with the dogs sleeping happily in their beds.

"Get it together, Graham," He muttered to himself as he turned over in his bed, pulling a towel over him in place of the blanket.

Will woke in the morning, no longer thinking about the strange, white-eyed creature. He went about his usual morning routine then set the coffee pot to brew his coffee, the only breakfast he truly ever had in the morning. While he waited for the coffee, he roused his dogs, who blinked at him sleepily, tails echoing where they collided with the floor.

Will opened the front door while fitting the dogs back, trying to give himself room to open the screen door, when two things caught his attention.

The first was a pair of hoofprints in the frost on his front step.

The second was a fish carefully placed on the porch in front of the door, already dead and gutted.

Chapter 2

Will couldn't help but think that the dead fish on his porch was a threat.

Maybe the creature he had seen the day before took offense at Will fishing in its territory. Maybe it thought Will had stolen from it when he took the fish. Maybe it was warning Will that soon he would be the one dead and gutted. Maybe-

It was only the ringing of his phone that snapped him out of the rabbit hole of dread that he had spiraled down in the few seconds after seeing the fish on his porch. His dogs, however, couldn't be bothered with the fish or any meaning behind it, carefully running around it until they were able to stampede down the porch and into the yard. Will blinked at the dogs and then down at the fish again as he tried to process what exactly the meaning was behind it.

Was it truly malevolent?

His phone rang again, and Will huffed, bending to grab the fish. Even if he was going to die, he knew better than to waste a perfectly good fish, even if it was a threat. He placed it in the fridge beside the fish he had caught the day before, then moved to his bedside table to take his phone off the charger.

"Graham," He muttered as he walked to the front door, stepping outside to watch the dogs. His eyes, however, kept skittering to the tree line, looking for signs of antlers or white eyes.

"It's Bev," Beverly greeted on the other end, sounding far more chipper than he was. "You ok? You should shook up."

Will pursed his lips as his eyes scanned the trees before letting out a slow breath. "It's the cold. Just let the dogs out." He paused for a moment, hoping Beverly would tell him the reason she called without further prompting. Of course, that wasn't a luxury he was afforded. "Why the call?"

"Jack wants us to come in. There's a crime scene."

"Never known Jack to leave the phone calls to someone else." Will huffed, watching the dogs jump on each other, rolling in the dead grass.

"I volunteered. You're just so chipper in the morning; who could resist calling you."

Will huffed in response, and he knew Beverly grinned.

"He wants us all to come in before we go to the crime scene."

Will rolled his eyes to himself but didn't say anything. Of course, Jack would want them to come to him first. Things were rarely ever done the simple way with Jack Crawford.

"I'll leave in a minute."

"Better grab some coffee," Beverly said. "I don't want to deal with coffee-less grumpy Will Graham." Will was silent though it didn't matter because Beverly continued. "It's a different Will from your everyday Grumpy Will and different still from the 'someone just said something stupid because they can't make the same leaps in logic that I can' Will Graham. And even that is different from you're 'hey, it's Tuesday' Will Graham."

"You should tell that to Jack. Sounds like you have me all figured out. He wouldn't keep trying to pawn me off on psychiatrists." Will clicked his tongue for the dogs to return, brushing off dirt from each of them before they ventured into the house.

"Oh, I'm not brave enough to run around that mind of yours. I sometimes wonder how you're brave enough."

"No choice."

"Fair enough." Beverly was quiet for a moment. "All right, Mr. Chatty, I'll see you in an hour."

Will didn't bother saying goodbye before hanging up. By the time he was back inside, the coffee was made. He poured himself a cup then went about making the dogs' their breakfast before jumping in the barely warm shower. The cold water shocked him enough that he no longer thought about the possibility that some strange creature might be wanting to kill him. Instead, he tried to force himself into his usual mindset, guarding his mind in a way he knew was nowhere near good enough before confronting the afterimages left by whatever killer they were hunting today.

Will finished his first cup of coffee then poured the rest into a travel mug before setting off, ignoring the hoofprints on the front steps.

He set the travel mug on top of his car as he unlocked it when behind him, he heard the familiar snap of a twig. He wheeled around, eyes scanning the tree line until he found a pair of antlers. Again, it was the stag, and Will could see, even at this distance, that he hadn't imagined the feathers covering its body. Between blinks, the creature changed again until the same human-like creature watched him with white eyes.

The creature titled its head, almost seeming curious about the scene in front of him.

Will stared at it, and the creature stared at Will in return for what felt like an eternity until he realized why he was standing by his car in the first place. Part of him thought it was dangerous to turn his back on such a creature; if it truly wanted to kill him, Will was giving it the opportunity to do so. Another part of Will, however, argued that if the creature were going to kill him, it would have the moment it saw him. Instead, it hovered in the trees, not moving any closer.

Will climbed into his car, remembering the travel mug on top at the last moment before shutting the car door. The creature stayed in the trees, though it had moved forward more and still; it seemed almost curious.

Will wondered what would happen if he let himself empathize with the creature, if he would find any emotions or a mind there to greet his own, but there were already too many monsters running around his own. He didn't need an actual monster on top of it, even if it didn't seem too human, to begin with.

He started his car and took a sip of coffee before pulling out of his driveway. He couldn't help but look in the rearview mirror to see if something was following him, but when he looked, he saw nothing.

The further Will was from Wolf Trap, the more he felt like he was being followed. Yet, every time he looked through the rearview mirror or either of the side mirrors, he never caught sight of a white-eyed pursuer.

Did the creature think Will was trying to run? Was that what it was waiting for? Was this a game to it?

Will already knew the creature could move incredibly fast, appearing and disappearing between blinks; maybe it could keep up with a car flying down the interstate. He couldn't help but clutch the steering wheel more, trying to force himself to focus on the road rather than the off chance a creature who hung around the vast, open space of Wolf Trap trying to follow him. After all, there was a reason Will had moved to Wolf Trap in the first place. Plenty of open space, and the neighbors were few and far between. It was probably the ideal place for a creature to live too, not likely to be caught.

Will tried to reason to himself that a creature like that, no matter how smart or vengeful, wouldn't want to follow Will into a crowded area. Even if it were following him now, it would be deterred by the time he reached Quantico.

His hands twisted on the wheel while his foot was like lead on the gas pedal, rocketing him down the road. What was normally an hour's drive was closer to 30 minutes by the time Will pulled into the parking lot.

He shook himself before he ever exited the car, trying to return to the mindset he would need for a crime scene rather than the paranoia that had clung to him since the previous afternoon.

When he left his car, he couldn't help but look around for the creature, and some part of him sighed with relief that he didn't find white eyes waiting for him. He forced himself inside the building, ignoring most of the people around him as best he could until he reached Jack's office.

Even there, though, he ignored everyone, moving to the back of the room to be as far away as possible as he could from any of the room's other occupants. There weren't many, just the usual people Will would expect. Jack greeted him when he arrived, and Beverly gave a small wave, but neither Price nor Zeller seemed to spare him much of a glance. He was grateful for that, though, knowing it would be all too easy to slip into their minds if he wanted.

And he didn't want to. The minds of his colleagues were not places he wanted to venture even if he considered at least one of them friends. People were hard and loud. Always so loud.

He listened idly while Jack explained the crime scene they were about to go to, about the hand found sticking out of the ground by some teenagers in the middle of the woods. For a moment, Will's paranoia spiked again before he shoved it down, reminding himself that he wouldn't be alone if he went.

Together, the four of them left the office with Beverly playfully bumping her shoulder against him to garner some reaction. Will just looked at her, which seemed to make her smile more before he raised his hand with his travel mug as if to tell him to drink more coffee.

By the time they were outside again, Will had firmly shoved the creature into the back of his mind.

But the creature didn't seem to have the same mindset.

Will stepped outside of the building with the sun at his back, barely over the building yet. The shadow of the building stretched in front of him as Will breathed in the cool air. It would warm up later in the day as it always did, but overall it was cool. Jack offered him a ride while Beverly, Price, and Zeller piled into one of their cars — Will didn't know whose. He shook his head. While he knew why Jack often offered him a ride, it was hard enough to go to a crime scene with Jack's mind constantly pressing against his own and even worse to return from him with how demanding Jack's mind always was against his. He didn't mean to be, Will knew, but Jack had a strong personality, one that worked well for his job description but did little to comfort Will's psyche when a new killer was running around it.

Will just started to walk to his car when the shadows in front of him changed slightly.

A pair of antlers appeared at the edge of the building's shadow, where the sun touched the roof, stretching forward in Will's path.

Will turned around so quickly; he heard the liquid in his cup slosh. Above him at the top of the building, several stories above Will was the creature. It stared down at him, white eyes gazing into his own before it cocked its head slightly in one direction, then the other, before smiling, just as it had done the day before.

"Graham!" Beverly called as the car pulled up behind him. "Gotta get going!"

Will nodded and dropped his gaze as the car drove past him. When he looked back up, however, the creature was gone as though it had never been there in the first place. Will looked down at his coffee again, taking a massive drink even though it burned his tongue, hoping he could snap himself out of whatever had his imagination running so wild.

There was no way the creature followed him to Quantico. He was seeing things.

He would say he was going insane, but insane wasn't a word that sat well with him. He'd heard it one too many times floated by school counselors and psychiatrists who evaluated him when he was younger.

Unstable, insane, psychopathic, liar.

These were words Will knew too much of. Freddie Lounds, an inflammatory journalist who Will often came across at crime scenes, dubbed him the FBI's pet psycho whose leash was held by Jack Crawford. Only Freddie argued that Jack didn't hold the leash tight enough.

It takes a serial killer to catch a serial killer. Freddie wrote about him once.

It didn't bother him what Freddie thought, but he had taken his time to carefully construct what the outside world saw of him as he buried his darkness. He sometimes wondered if people like Freddie, who certainly displayed psychopathic traits herself, could see through it.

Will barely noticed the drive from Quantico to the crime scene — or how he even got to his car— his mind too occupied by everything else.

Will sighed to himself, taking the last sip of coffee before forcing himself from his car, adjusting his glasses on his face.

The glasses weren't a necessity, per se, but he used them to have a physical barrier between himself and others. Most often, especially in Western society, eye contact was demanded out of people, but Will hated eye contact. People would say the eyes were the windows to the soul, and Will found that all too true. It was too easy to fall into the mind of someone else when their eyes met, and his mind automatically put together everything about them from a simple gaze. The glasses, however, gave him space. Something to look at while he feigned eye contact, a way to stay separate while trying to appease social standards.

Not that social standards mattered much.

By the time Will arrived, the others were already cataloging the area but were soon cleared out by Jack so Will could examine the crime scene on his own.

Will took off his glasses, shoving away the creature and thoughts of the world he could never truly be a part of, to focus on the world he knew all too well. Psychopaths and sociopaths were the easiest. He knew them all too well.

The crime scene shifted behind his eyelids as he watched the bodies as they were placed, as the mushrooms were planted around them, as they grew and wove themselves together. He watched as the bodies grew weaker and eventually died while the mushrooms flourished, entangled in a way other things could never possibly achieve.

All of this flashed behind his eyelids while the world around him seemingly vanished.

That was until a twig snapped somewhere beyond the crime scene tape.

Will's eyes shot open, finding a pair of white eyes watching him from the trees, staring at him intently.

"Oh my god!" Some exclaimed behind him, and suddenly the world barreled back in as others rushed forward.

"Did you see that?" Beverly asked, suddenly at Will's side and staring ahead of him.

"See what?"

"It looked like a deer. A massive deer."

Will shrugged. "It's not usual for a deer to wander this far."

"Yeah, but it looked weird," Beverly said.

"How so?"

"I don't know. It looked almost-" She cut herself off, but Will's mind supplied the answer for her.

Human. It looked almost human.

Almost.

"You really didn't see that?" Beverly asked, turning toward him.

Will shook his head. "I wasn't looking."

Why was he lying?

Chapter 3

Will found himself looking over his shoulder for the rest of the day, looking for white eyes or looming antlers. Following the crime scene, though, Will hadn't caught sight of his follower for the rest of the day. Will returned home feeling strangely alone, waiting for white eyes or antlers that never came. He followed his usual routine, letting the dogs out once he arrived home. And still, when he scanned the tree line, he found nothing. It was odd but what was more bizarre to Will was the feeling of loneliness that suddenly came with the absence of the creature. A creature he had only known existed for 24 hours, and yet a lack of fleeting glances was enough to make Will feel like some significant part of him was missing.

Will sighed as he let the dogs back inside to make dinner. Will rarely ate much. A part of it was a holdover from childhood when food was scarce, and he would have to skip a meal or two. Another aspect of it, though, was his own self-neglect. Often he took out his darkness on himself rather than anyone else. His darkness needed an outlet, but part of him was still trapped within the mask he had made for himself, the cage he put on his own monster. It confined him enough, so he was left with only a few outlets for the darkness within him, and those outlets were most often himself.

He had snacked for lunch, but beyond a few bites of food, he hadn't had much to eat. He forced himself to make dinner, taking the second fish he had caught to make his newest dinner out of. As he pulled the fish from the fridge, though, his eyes caught on the second fish, the one left that morning.

At the time, he thought maybe the fish was meant as a threat, but now that he thought more about the creature, he wasn't quite sure the creature was malevolent. At least not toward him. It had several opportunities to kill Will from the first instant it saw him to earlier that day when Will stood watching it outside his car. The creature didn't attack him; it looked almost curious.

Will shoved the thoughts aside and slammed the door shut.

It was the strange loneliness talking. He didn't know the creature. He didn't even know if it had thoughts beyond that of an animal. He was thinking too much about a strange occurrence that likely meant nothing.

The creature would probably grow bored soon, especially considering it likely couldn't enter Will's house to eat him in the middle of the night. There was no use in spending so much time thinking about it.

Yet, even as Will shoved his thoughts away, they wormed their way back into the forefront of his mind, replacing even the killer Will had seen the aftermath of earlier that day. Will didn't think of mushrooms or arms hovering out of the ground. He thought instead of white eyes that stared at him from the trees, a head slowly cocking from side to side. He thought about the fact that the creature mimicked what he had done the day before when he saw it first in

the deer form. Did it believe Will's movements were a greeting? Was it mimicking him to scare him? Was it trying to be friendly? Why did it leave the fish on his doorstep?

Will dragged himself out of his thoughts at the smell of burning fish.

Unfortunately for him, his dinner was utterly ruined; the fish blackened all the way through as he pulled it from the pan. Smoke wafted through the house, and Will only barely reached the back door to open it when the fire alarm started chirping at him, warning him belatedly of his ruined dinner. The dogs were up in arms at noise while Will swung the door back and forth, trying to waft the cool night air through the house and push the smoke out.

As Will swung the door back and forth, carefully watching the dogs where they hovered at the edge of the kitchen, he caught sight of something in the window. It was only a reflection, but it was enough to drag his attention away from his current task.

He moved the door just slightly, trying to catch the same reflection again, a hint of antlers peering around the edge of the house. This time, though, there was nothing. Will opened the door more and then opened the screen door, stepping outside.

The night air was cold against his skin, raising goosebumps on his sensitive flesh. There were more trees in the back part of his property, and they came closer to his house than the trees out front. He had seen deer tracks closer to the house on the back edge of his property than the front. He couldn't help himself wonder now if those tracks belonged to the same creature, or it was truly deer who had walked too close to his house.

Either way, Will's eyes scanned the night with what little light his house behind him provided.

He didn't catch sight of those antlers again, though, but some part of him was relieved to have seen them in the first place.

Maybe he really was going insane.

Will waited a moment more, hearing the dogs whine inside, before he turned around, stepping back inside, not bothering to close the back door fully.

The dogs sniffed the trashcan as Will threw out the burnt remnants of his dinner before sighing into the skin.

Maybe he wouldn't eat tonight at all.

Or maybe-

Will turned toward the fridge again, pulling out the fish left on his doorstep earlier that day.

He looked down at the fish, carefully examining how well the fish had been gutted. It was a surprisingly excellent job, but given the claws Will had seen on the creature, he supposed he really couldn't be surprised. He looked back at the pan in the sink before raising his eyes once more, mostly on instinct.

Despite how much lighter it was inside than outside, Will could clearly see white eyes watching him from the trees.

Will walked around his counter, hearing the dogs shuffle around him, until he reached the screen door once again. The creature watched him then stepped further out of the tree line until it was no longer entirely hidden by the trees.

It was taller than Will thought initially, with antlers that almost looked like they could touch the moon. Its hands hung at its sides, long, clawed fingers almost fidgeting against thighs. The creature blinked then leaned forward, settling on its hands before shuffling closer. Will wondered if that was always how it moved, if it often used all fours, or if it was just doing so to make itself look smaller and less intimidating.

It failed miserably at the latter.

Will reached up, pressing a hand against the screen door.

The creature paused where it crouched before raising one of its own hands, mimicking Will once again.

Then, just like before, between blinks, it was gone.

Will stared after it for a while, wondering if it still watched him from the trees or if it truly left when it ran away.

Either way, Will felt somewhat relieved at seeing the creature, not once but twice before his paranoia clawed at the back of his mind again.

What if the creature had crouched to attack him? What if it only stopped because Will moved? It looked like an apex predator, was it so easily scared?

Will shoved the paranoia down again as he closed the backdoor fully this time, locking it with a soft click.

It seemed silly to waste a perfectly good fish, so Will tried again with his dinner, trying not to think about the fact that he could be eating a death threat. However, this meal turned out better than his previous attempt, and Will went to bed with a full stomach.

He let his dogs out once more, once again scanning the tree line for those white eyes, but nothing appeared.

Will sighed to himself, trying once again to shake himself out of whatever funk he'd been in for over 24 hours now. Maybe most people would think about a creature who followed them from place to place, even daring to near a crime scene. But Will wasn't most people. His mind was occupied by human monsters, not actual monsters, though he supposed he shouldn't be surprised that even those filled the empty spaces within him.

That monster was the only one Will had ever encountered where its mind didn't immediately try to overtake his own. Will downed several glasses of whiskey, all while wondering what it meant. Was the creature not close enough to humans? Maybe it was because the creature

learned how to guard its mind, something humans could rarely do. Or maybe Will was far too focused on what could ultimately be a weird animal, and he was letting it occupy most of his time.

He sighed and down his next class in one drink, trying, for once, to force himself to think about the killer he was supposed to be hunting.

There was something significant about the mushrooms, Will knew it. Why, of all things, would the killer kill people just to plant mushrooms? The victims likely didn't die right away; the one they found who was still alive died on the way to the hospital. But there was something significant there. Mushrooms were a fungus, and like plants, they needed the ideal environment to grow. Maybe there was something about their human food that made them ideal for fertilizing a mushroom farm. Will made a mental note to ask about the victims' past medical histories when he saw Beverly the next day. The killer was likely using people with diabetes. He could somehow give them the wrong medicine to increase their blood sugar and send them into ketosis. They would be easier to move, and the increased sugar could provide nutrients for the mushrooms.

But why mushrooms?

And why was Will, of all people, being followed by a monster?

Will tucked himself into bed, his mind wandering around every question he had posed to himself that day while he watched the dogs settle into their own beds. One, Buster, sneezed before nearly collapsing on top of another, stretching on them as though they were the bed.

Will pulled the blankets up to his shoulders and closed his eyes.

But the moment his eyelids closed, they shot back open as the hairs on the back of Will's neck tingled.

He felt strangely like he was being watched, but he couldn't force himself to look at the windows for some reason. Instead, he pulled his blankets up higher.

If I die, I die. He thought to himself.

He let his eyelids fall shut, trying to lull himself to sleep.

He barely felt like he slept at all when his eyes flew open once again. This time, though, the clock read 5:30 am. The sun had yet to come up, and the dogs slept in their beds, utterly unaware of Will's sudden wakefulness.

He stared at the space in front of him, eyes adjusting to the darkness. He rolled over onto his back, finally looking at the windows he had avoided looking at before. The only thing he found looking back was the night which peaked through the curtains, still and quiet.

Will pushed himself upward, seeing the moon shine through the window to his right. The world around him was calm, quiet. Not eerily, though. It was the same quiet that Will was used to when the world was far away and the closest things to him asleep. Sometimes, Will

liked the early morning hours, when everything was sleeping, and only he was there to see the world.

Will sighed to himself as the last of his sleepiness drifted away. It would be difficult for him to fall asleep again, given how much he had already woken up, so he stretched before standing and moving toward his desk. There was just enough light from the moon to illuminate the desk in front of him, and any more would rouse the dogs. He reached for his lure, turning it carefully in its holder for him to continue working on it.

He didn't know what had inspired this particular lure, but now that he began to work on it again, he found himself placing in darker feathers than usual. Fish were often attracted to the brighter colors, but he couldn't force himself to use them. Instead, he placed black and deep blue feathers on the lure, securing them around the hook.

He was so focused on his newest creation, seeing black, shining feathers behind his eyes, that he missed the movement out front.

Will didn't look up until the front porch creaked.

Will's eyes shot upward, searching through the curtains to see what was the cause. It wasn't abnormal for the house to settle, even so early in the morning as temperatures changed. But this creek wasn't from the house settling. This creek was caused by weight pushing downward on the wooden boards that made up the porch.

Will stood quietly, careful to make his steps light as he mainly walked on his toes. The dogs shifted in their beds, but Will shushed them, stepping with careful, deliberate steps toward the door.

Another creek followed as Will reached for the locks, turning the deadbolt first and then the lock on the handle. He could barely hear the locks shift with how slow he moved, but he wondered if the creature's hearing was any better than his. He didn't have time to debate himself over it, though. After a short pause, Will practically threw the door open, finding the creature on the other side and a new fish on the porch.

The creature's eyes shot to his, or Will assumed so anyway, even though the creature had no irises.

It froze, staring at Will from the other side of the screen door.

It had lowered itself to fit on the porch, arching over itself to keep its antlers from banging against the porch covering. One leg was on the porch, with the other on the concrete step adjacent to it. It seemed as though the creature had only just placed the fish when Will opened the door as one hand was still stretched toward the fish.

This was the closest Will had been to the creature, so close he could almost feel the creature's breath through the screen.

The creature cocked its head, just barely, antlers knocking above it.

Then its other hand appeared, moving slowly as though it was trying not to scare a skittish animal. Will couldn't see what was in its hand; he couldn't force himself to look anywhere but at the creature's eyes, but soon it had laid down whatever it was he had. Then the creature backed away slowly, dipping its head to make sure its antlers cleared the edge of the roof before standing to its full height in front of the house. It was only then, with how close Will was to it, that he finally realized that the creature wasn't it, but rather he. Part of him wondered how he could have missed that, but a more significant part of him wanted the creature to stay as it backed away from him. But as he opened the screen door, the creature vanished once more.

Will looked down at the newest gift at his feet. He had already seen the fish, but placed over it was a single, dark blue flower. Will bent to pick it up, raising it to his nose before realizing what he was doing.

Belatedly, he realized the flower was the same color as his eyes as he looked toward the tree line once again.

Connection. His brain supplied suddenly. *He wants connection.*

But which he was his brain talking about?

Chapter 4

Will couldn't stop thinking about the creature throughout the day and well into the next. Will had placed the flower the creature had offered him in a small glass next to his bedside, and he found himself staring at the blue petals as he tried to fall asleep at night. Whatever he had previously thought about the creature went out the window the moment he spotted the flower. For some reason, that one simple gesture, the flower the color of Will's eyes, was enough to convince him that the creature wasn't there to hurt him, that the fish it brought for him to eat weren't threats.

But if it wasn't a threat, what was it?

What did the creature want from him, and why was it so insistent on offering him food and flowers? The next morning was the same, following the initial gift of the flower, only this time Will didn't wake up in time to see the creature leave his gifts. Still, when Will opened the front door, he found another fish and another blue flower over it. He couldn't help but wonder where the creature found it as there were no flowers in bloom anywhere around him. He thought maybe the creature somehow managed to break into a flower shop, given how even the cut on the stem was. But truthfully, it didn't matter, even if part of him was curious to see the reaction of someone watching a security tape with the creature on it stealing one specific flower.

Will placed the second flower next to the first, making certain to add extra water to the glass to keep both flowers happy. Only after the third flower appeared, the fourth day after the creature appeared in his life, Will began to wonder if he had ever received flowers before this. Often, men didn't receive flowers, but even still, he didn't think he ever had a relationship, romantic or platonic, where someone had thought enough about him to give him a flower.

It warmed up something strange within him, something he didn't quite recognize. It made his heart thunder a little faster when he caught sight of white eyes in the trees. His heart didn't hammer when he hunted criminals or when the darkness threatened to overtake him. It didn't hammer when he was on the wrong end of a gun or when he was stabbed as a police officer. Yet the gifts he was left and the seemingly constant white-eyed presence around his house made his heart beat just a little faster.

He couldn't explain it, and he wasn't sure if he even wanted to. What would it say about him that he was affected in any way by gifts left by a monster?

Will tried to ignore it. He tried to ignore the fact that he lied to Beverly outright for a creature he barely knew, and he tried to ignore the fact that every glimpse of white eyes was just a little more comforting than the last.

Even when they caught the killer they were hunting, following autopsies that confirmed Will's hypothesis, Will was too busy thinking about the creature to give more than a thought or two to the case. Part of him enjoyed hunting other monsters; it was a way to utilize his

darkness when he couldn't otherwise. And yet, this latest catch didn't offer the catharsis others had. It didn't matter as much to him. All he could see behind his eyelids were antlers and those now familiar eyes.

When at home, he spent more time outside than usual, letting his dogs run around more and taking longer walks with them so that he could glimpse the creature.

Part of him kept hoping that maybe he would learn this wasn't real. That maybe his growing obsession was his own imagination besting him. Yet when he saw those eyes, those antlers, he couldn't help but think that it was real. That he was real. And that, for some reason, the creature was just as fascinated with him as he was the creature.

They had never spoken a real word to each other, he didn't know if the creature had a name or if he had a mind at all like a human, and the creature didn't know Will's name or anything about him beyond the few simple things he had seen here and there. The creature knew he fished, had dogs, and the color of his eyes, and that was all. Yet somehow, they both had decided that the other was worthy of their attention, even if there was no real reason for it.

Will tried to argue with himself that anyone would be fascinated by the creature. Who else in the world had truly come across something like it? He knew there were myths, of course, of creatures all over the world, and perhaps those myths had been based on similar beasts, yet when he looked at the creature, when it left him gifts, he couldn't see the same monsters that myths had been written about.

And so it went for the next two weeks.

Will would wake up every morning with a new fish and a new flower on his porch. When the old flowers died, new ones were already there to replace them, and Will had eaten so much fish in those two weeks, he wondered if he began to smell like it.

The dogs were happier with the longer walks Will had been taking with them, and every day the creature lingered a little longer in Will's field of view, taking more time before dashing away between blinks. Will thought maybe the creature was becoming more used to him, just as he was to the creature. Strangely enough, the dogs never seemed to notice the creature was there until it made a noise. When the dogs saw the creature, or at least looked in the general direction, Will felt more and more confident that he didn't imagine him. He wondered why the dogs didn't seem to smell him and wondered if the creature had a scent at all. Maybe that was how he avoided detection for so many years. That and his speed.

But why, if he tried to avoid people, did he not run away from Will? And why did he continue to leave gifts every morning for Will to find?

Two weeks and two days after their initial encounter, Will finally had another up-close experience with the creature.

Will's eyes flew open, waking him from sleep. He didn't know what woke him or why, but as he looked at the time, he knew the creature would be coming soon. Will forced himself up, stretching and blinking sleep from his eyes. He couldn't help but think that he woke because

he knew the creature was coming, and that thought made him wonder if he was insane. No one else would wake up just to see a strange being leave fish and flowers at their doorstep before running off.

Yet here Will was, waking up before the sun even rose just to catch a closer look at his mysterious follower.

Will pushed himself out of bed, finding some pants and a coat to cover him before carefully stepping through his house, trying not to wake his dogs. He slipped through the front door, closing it softly behind him before looking out over his property, wondering if he could catch a glimpse of the creature so far. The dead grass in front of him was covered in a thin layer of frost, unbroken by footfalls and what he assumed would be the heat of a body.

Will walked over to the chair on his porch, hissing slightly through his teeth as the cold seeped through his clothing. He wasn't left waiting for long as soon the trees in front of him began to shift, and more branches seemingly appeared. Will perked up, watching as two sets of branches detached from the trees and moved closer. It was too dark to see the creature's eyes as he moved closer, but soon enough, the creature was at his front porch.

He seemed surprised to see Will, cocking his head back and forth at the sight of him in the chair. Will moved to the edge slowly, hoping that slow movements would prevent the creature from running. He remembered the creature doing the same weeks ago when it set down the first flower.

The creature set down the newest fish first, and Will's eyes followed the movement.

"As much as I appreciate it, I think I'm good on fish," Will muttered even though he knew there was no way the creature understood.

Yet as he spoke, the creature paused, his head twisting toward Will so fast, his antlers knocked against the roof.

Will wondered if he misspoke if the creature would finally kill him. Instead, the creature seemed to nod, eyes focused on Will. Will couldn't force himself to make eye contact, even with a creature who wasn't human. The creature shuffled forward more and nodded again, as though he was trying to encourage Will.

"Oh," Will said aloud, his brain finally putting the pieces together. "You want me to talk?"

The creature nodded, antlers banging before he seemed to realize what he was doing, and lowered himself. He seemed to look at Will for permission before gesturing to the step on his porch. Will nodded, and he sat, head tilting to make sure his antlers didn't bang.

"You seem-" Will began, watching the movement. The movement was that of a creature far more intelligent than that of the actions of normal animals. Will's dogs barely cared where their tails flew. Humans, however, tended to be more careful. "Almost human."

To his surprise, the creature nodded as he folded his hands on his lap, twisting the newest flower between his fingers.

"But you can't talk?" Will asked.

The creature turned to him, bobbing his head oddly. His head weaved this away and that, ducking and lifting his head before he let out a huff.

For some reason, the huff made Will smile. There was something so human about it, something that sounded so much like frustration that it tugged at the edges of his lips.

The creature cocked his head then smiled, baring sharp teeth. Yet Will didn't think he was baring his teeth as a threat. Like before, it seemed like he was mimicking him.

"I'd ask you why you keep bringing this stuff, but I don't think you would answer." Will ducked his head as he spoke, staring down at his hands.

The creature huffed again before the porch creaked.

Will's eyes shot upward as the creature moved, carefully ducking his head to avoid the roof once more. He practically kneeled in front of Will, his antlers making it hard to stand to his full height. Will's breath caught in his chest as he watched one clawed hand raise, the flower grasped between his fingertips.

The creature offered the flower to him, holding it just under his nose. Will leaned forward, wary of leaning too close, and inhaled, smelling the sweet scent that lingered on the petals. The creature seemingly inhaled with him, and he knew if he looked, his eyes would be glued to Will.

When he finished his inhale, Will leaned back, but the creature leaned forward, the hand with the flower still extended toward him. Will froze, watching the creature's hand as he intently pushed forward, pressing the soft petals to the edge of his upper lip. Then he drew the flower downward, gently caressing Will's lips with the petals. He continued to drag it down until the edge of the petal caressed Will's chin.

Will gaped, his mouth falling open at the act.

He didn't know what to make of it or why the creature had done it.

The creature, however, seemed completely calm, not at all affected by the act the way Will was.

He offered Will the flower again, holding the very edge of the stem so Will could wrap his fingers around it without their hands brushing. He almost tried to touch him, but the creature withdrew his hand the moment Will pinched the stem between his fingers.

He withdrew, moving back across the porch until he was back on the step again.

Then he looked down at the fish before grasping it and offering it to Will, setting it in his lap before Will could even reach for it.

The creature was still for a moment before he launched upward, carefully avoiding the edge of the roof.

Will didn't even have a chance to speak before he was gone.

For the next two days, Will only caught glimpses of the creature in the trees. Every morning, though, he would wake to find flowers on his doorstep. Instead of a fish, the creature opted to leave him more than one. The first was the usual flower he had given Will, but the second was a red tulip.

Of the two flowers, it was the red one that made Will's heart stop. He couldn't explain it, and frankly, he didn't want to. He could still feel the gentle caress of the petals against his lips from days before, but even this somehow seemed different.

Will spent hours after work thinking not about the case or the newest killer but about the flowers.

The second night, Will sat in his chair, staring at the flowers next to his bed. In hindsight, he had no idea what made him put them there, yet there they were every morning, the first sight Will saw when he opened his eyes. He nursed a glass of whiskey, staring at the flowers and the petals that littered the table around them.

He couldn't explain it. He couldn't explain any of it.

Will only knew one thing, and that was the fact that every encounter had been real. The creature was real; Will had felt the creature's actions where his lips still tingled.

Just as he took another drink of whiskey, thoughts swirling more than the liquid in his glass, three sharp knocks echoed through Will's house.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Here comes the bestest boy.

Will stood up so fast, the dogs jumped up with him, all too excited by Will's movements. He set down his glass and nearly ran to the door but hesitated when he reached for the handle. The creature had never knocked before; Will didn't even know if he knew how to knock. Will's hand hovered over the door handle, wondering if it was worth it to have launched up so quickly with whoever was on the other side. In hindsight, he wondered why he launched himself up after hearing the knock, thinking the creature could be the one knocking.

Will's hand finally landed on the handle, and he stared at it for a moment, wondering if it was at all worth it to open the door. What if it was Alana on the other side, come to check on him because she thought him fragile? What if it was Jack coming to tell him about a new crime scene? Or what if someone had finally decided he was too dangerous to be in the world and came to lock him up? These thoughts ran around Will's mind in circles until another one took their place. What if it truly was the creature, and he was knocking to catch Will's attention? Maybe he wasn't even truly knocking; it could be his antlers, which Will had seen for himself could bang against the roof.

He finally turned the handle and opened the door.

He couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief that was quickly followed by curiosity at what he found on the other side.

The creature was standing just on the other side of Will's porch, careful not to bang his antlers against the roof again. When Will opened the door, the creature ducked as though he was trying to make eye contact before offering Will what he held, cradled in his arms.

That was probably what shocked Will the most.

Not that the creature appeared with a new gift, but what the gift was.

In the creature's arms was a dog.

The dog mainly had brown fur with some dark spots and a collar and leash around his neck. He looked up at the creature, sniffing him before he turned toward Will, tail thumping slightly.

"What-" Will began, blinking at the sight in front of him.

The creature extended his arms as though he was offering the dog to Will even though Will had yet to open the screen door. Around him, his dogs gathered, sniffing and barking, tails wagging at the scent of a new dog. Will, on the other hand, was still shocked, staring at the sight before him.

Of all the things he thought the creature would bring him, dog, alive and well, was not one of them. The dog looked back and forth again before whimpering slightly, dragging Will out of his shock.

"Hold on," Will told the creature before turning to fight his way through his pack, who kept pushing forward and around each other to see the new dog.

Will moved to his fridge and pulled out some of the treats he had made for his own dogs, hoping he could use it to keep the new one calm. It took quite some effort to finally maneuver his way around his own dogs before he shut the front door and the screen door behind him, locking them in the house.

The creature watched Will the whole time then offered the dog to him once again when Will was closer. Will stepped forward to the edge of his porch and extended his arms. The creature was surprisingly gentle as he placed the dog in Will's arms. When he withdrew, however, their arms brushed and sent an electric shock through Will's body. Not because of the touch itself, but because of how cold the creature was.

"You're freezing," Will breathed, ignoring the struggling of the dog, now in his arms. A part of him wondered if the dog didn't struggle before because it was afraid and now was less afraid of Will. But most of him thought about that chill of the creature's skin and how terrible it must be to be outside in the cold all the time.

Will bent, placing the squirming dog on the edge of the porch before offering him a treat. The dog sniffed his hand cautiously but seemed to be too hungry to care as soon he stole the treat from his hand, swallowing it quickly. Will scratched behind his ears as he took the collar in hand, turning it to look for tags.

"Where did he find you, huh?" Will asked the dog, knowing he would have just as likely a chance of the dog answering as the creature.

The creature moved forward, catching Will's attention before pointing in the distance.

"You didn't steal him, did you?" Will asked as he offered the dog another treat.

The creature shook his head before pointing again then used two fingers to mimic running.

"He was running?" Will asked, and the creature nodded. "On the road or-" The creature nodded again before Will could finish. He turned toward the dog again, offering a third treat. "I wonder where you came from."

Will stroked the dog's head again before carefully reaching for the leash and tying it to his porch.

"Stay," He told the dog. "I'll get you cleaned up and then introduce you to the rest of the pack."

The creature looked at him, shifting almost awkwardly on his feet before he turned.

"Wait," Will managed, catching the creature right before he dashed away again. "Are you hungry? I have some leftovers. You could stay and eat."

The creature cocked his head, and Will wondered how much of what he just said was actually understood. It didn't seem to matter as the creature turned back toward the porch and nodded, pointing again but this time at the spot where he had sat two days earlier.

"Yes," Will said, standing. "Sit. I'll be right back."

The creature sat while Will pushed his way inside, trying to navigate around the sea of dogs at his feet. He went to his kitchen to warm up some water before digging through his fridge to find something the creature might like. He decided on fish, hoping that part of the reason the creature kept offering it was because he liked it too. Then he went back outside, offering the food on a paper plate to the creature and set the water down next to the dog.

The creature turned the food in his hands, evaluating the plate and poking at it with his claws.

"It's just to hold the food," Will explained, even though he knew it might be useless. "It's so that it doesn't make a mess, and you don't have to handle hot food."

The creature nodded, though Will didn't know how much of what he just said was understood. Either way, he walked to the other side of his porch and grabbed the container he used to bathe the dogs in.

The creature carefully lifted a piece of fish, examining it before deeming it edible. The creature had eaten only one bite when Will looked after setting the container down, but the food was gone entirely when he looked back. Will blinked as the creature set down the plate and licked his fingers, seemingly satisfied.

The dog sneezed in Will's direction, forcing his gaze away from the creature as he set down the plate.

Coaxing the dog into the container was hard, but the moment Will ran the warm water down the dog's back, he calmed. Will bathed the dog carefully, taking note of the mud crusted in his paws. Meanwhile, the creature shuffled closer, seeming curious about what Will was doing. At some point, Will started narrating his actions, telling the creature and dog alike what he was doing as he worked. Will could feel the cold that radiated off the creature as he neared until the creature was right next to him, the closest he had ever been.

Will tried not to shy away from the cold even though it was so cold it felt almost painful.

The creature, however, didn't seem to mind. Will wondered if the heat from his own body was too much for the creature. He tended to run warm, and to something as cold as him, Will must be like a furnace.

Yet the creature moved forward still, wary of its antlers as it leaned closer and closer.

Will didn't notice in time when the creature leaned into his space, his face near Will's neck. Will froze, wondering if this was finally it, when the creature inhaled, eyes closing.

Will swallowed thickly, the sound of it audible to even him.

The creature pulled away just as slowly before opening its eyes and pointing at Will.

"What?" Will asked, sounding breathless.

The creature pointed at him again.

"Me?" Will asked. The creature nodded and pointed once more. "What about me?"

The creature huffed and then pointed a fourth time.

"My name?" Will asked, unable to come up with another reason why the creature might be pointing at him.

The creature nodded vehemently, antlers banging on accident as he did.

"Will," He said. "My name is Will."

The creature cocked his head, seeming thoughtful. Will waited for a moment then returned to his task as he dried off the dog. He thought maybe he'd name the new dog Winston. He didn't know why, but it just seemed to fit. Will focused on one of Winston's paws when the creature shifted again, turning toward him more.

"Will," He said suddenly.

Will jumped, eyes widening as he looked at the creature. The creature perked up as Will looked at him, shifting closer to him as though in excitement.

"Will," The creature said again before raising a clawed hand.

Will followed the movement as the creature gestured to his eyes. Reluctantly, he looked at the creature's white eyes, a part of him still so shocked from hearing his name.

Hello, Will.

"What the-" Will jumped backward as the creature's voice, if he could call it that, echoed through his mind. He fell over, shock compounding on itself as he stared at the creature. On the other hand, the creature shuffled forward, bobbing its head as he tried to make eye contact with Will again.

Will swallowed thickly, forcing himself to find white eyes again.

Apologies. I didn't mean to frighten you.

"Frighten?" Will huffed, his heart pounding. "I-I just-you just- you can talk?"

The creature shifted, huffing again as Will's eyes had trailed away. At this point, it was such a habit to avoid eye contact that Will had to keep forcing himself to look again.

I can talk in a way. Not like you.

"But you said my name."

I can only say a few words like that, but it is difficult. This is the way I communicate.

"I just-" Will began again before he stopped, mouth falling open. "You understood me?"

Yes. The creature paused. *There are some words I am unfamiliar with, but mostly I can understand your language.*

"Can you understand others? Is it just English? How can you even speak English?"

I've been around for a long time, Will. I've learned your language and the languages of others over time.

"How old are you?" Will asked, but the creature shook his head.

I don't know. Time does not work the same for me as it does for you. I do not age like your species.

Will swallowed thickly, his brain running on overdrive as the creature spoke. Was it even talking? Will didn't know. It seemed more like telepathy, but it was limited to when Will made eye contact with him. He thought back to two days before when the creature kept bobbing and weaving his head. He was trying to make eye contact, Will realized. He was trying to talk to him.

It was why the creature understood well enough to stop bringing fish. Because Will had said, he was good when it came to fish. But the creature kept bringing flowers because Will never told him not to.

Will evaluated the creature in front of him, a creature who was far too human for Will's original assessment.

"What's your name?"

Hannibal. My name is Hannibal.

"Hannibal," Will breathed, testing the creature's name on his lips.

The creature's face seemed to light up as he shifted closer, nodding enthusiastically.

"Hello, Hannibal," Will greeted, mimicking the creature's own greeting to him.

You don't seem afraid anymore.

Will shook his head. "I was more shocked. I didn't think-didn't know you could talk. That you would talk to me."

I've been trying. The creature paused. *You're not fond of eye contact, are you?*

"Eyes are distracting," Will said almost automatically. He had given the same diatribe to people repeatedly throughout the years as an excuse to keep from looking them in the eye.

Distracting? The creature asked.

"You see too much; you don't see enough. It's hard to focus when you're thinking 'those whites are really white' or 'does he have hepatitis.'" Will elaborated. "I tend to avoid eyes."

You see too much. The creature said. *No barriers to keep the world away.*

"How did you-"

I can see you.

Will looked away, unable to keep up eye contact anymore. Something within him backflipped, though he was sure what or why. It was strange to have the conversation stop when Will looked away; most people just kept talking. But it wasn't that way with the creature.

Or rather, Hannibal.

His name was Hannibal.

The creature had a name and could talk to him and seemed to see right through him more than anyone else ever had, even though they had only just spoken.

"I-" He began, unsure of what to say.

Hannibal cocked his head, waiting.

"I should introduce the dogs so Winston can come in tonight," Will said, changing the subject. Hannibal seemed to deflate slightly, but he didn't leave as Will lured Winston into a cage to let the other dogs on the porch.

The first thing the dogs noticed was not another dog but Hannibal. Immediately, they moved toward him, sniffing and tails wagging. Hannibal froze, hands up as the dogs danced around him, curious. Will chuckled to himself at the sight.

"They're just curious," He said. "They haven't met you before."

Hannibal nodded before slowly lowering one hand. Buster was the closest to him, sniffing at his hoof. Hannibal patted the dog on his head, squishing him a bit, but Buster didn't care. He wagged his tail and barked happily, demanding more.

Will watched, amused, as Hannibal's long, clawed fingers carefully wound under the dog's body to lift him. Hannibal twisted him back and forth while Buster panted, tongue hanging from his mouth. The rest of the dogs seemed to forget the novelty of Hannibal as they remembered the other dog in their presence. They whined and tried to move closer, but Will clicked his tongue. The dogs froze, as did Hannibal, who had just barely placed Buster back down again.

"It's ok," Will told Hannibal. "I just don't want them charging Winston."

Hannibal pointed at Winston, who was still in the cage, now fluffy tail slowly wagging.

"Yes, he's Winston. And the dog you were just holding is Buster."

Hannibal cocked his head, then reached forward and patted the dog twice on the head.

Will felt himself smiling and quickly turned away, watching Winston.

He let each of the dogs come forward, one at a time to greet their newest pack member before he finally let Winston out of the cage.

He wasn't surprised when the pack accepted him quickly, but it did surprise him when Winston moved back toward Hannibal. The dog sniffed him and was the only one of them to try to move closer, standing on one of Hannibal's legs to sniff his face. When he seemed satisfied, the dog moved away and began sniffing the other dogs.

"Have you pet animals before?" Will asked, thinking about how Hannibal had been with Buster.

Hannibal shook his head.

"Will," He said, making Will turn toward him.

You did it.

"You saw me pet the dogs before."

Hannibal nodded.

"Oh." That was all Will could say.

He let the dogs sniff each other some more before they began to paw at the door, wanting to go inside for the night. Will knew he needed to go with them to make sure Winston didn't tear up the furniture or accidentally climb into a bed that belonged to another dog.

He opened the screen door to let the dogs inside. Behind him, Hannibal stood, carefully navigating his way off the porch until his antlers were free.

Will thought about the cold night air, and the chill from Hannibal's skin as the last dog entered the house.

"Wait," He said, turning around to see Hannibal still behind him. "Do you want to come inside?"

Chapter 6

Will waited as Hannibal seemed to debate in his mind. Then he moved closer, first reaching for the mat that was just next to Will and tugging it off the porch. Hannibal wiped one hoof then the other before gently placing the mat back where it was. Then he bent himself, lowering his antlers so they wouldn't collide with the roof. Will stood to the side as Hannibal entered, turning his head to allow his antlers to fit through the doorway. He didn't stand up fully once in Will's house but rather crouched as he had weeks ago, his legs bent and his hands to the ground. Will shut the screen door then the front door, sealing himself, his dogs, and Hannibal inside his house.

Hannibal looked around, eyeing everything carefully. Will watched as he moved toward the piano, carefully navigating around the dogs to touch it. His finger pressed one of the keys, and the sound echoed through the living room. Will winced, knowing the piano was out of tune. Hannibal, however, seemed fascinated enough by the piano that he pressed a few more keys. When that seemed to stop entertaining him, he moved toward the books on the shelves. Will watched as the dogs navigated around him, sniffing him more than they had before, while Hannibal carefully reached for a book, tugging it free.

"Do you read?" Will asked, taking off his jacket as he watched Hannibal flip through the pages.

Hannibal looked up at him, their eyes meeting briefly.

I read what people leave behind, but it's never much.

Will nodded and watched as Hannibal carefully placed the book where it was, even tilting it slightly, so it was back in its original position. Then he moved again, this time shuffling toward the fireplace.

Will thought again about how cold Hannibal had been. He moved toward the fireplace, too, tugging the grate away. Hannibal watched him, his eyes following the movements of Will's hands as Will lit first a match and then the logs in the fireplace.

A fire blazed to life, and Hannibal recoiled, pressing against the couch.

"It's ok," Will tried to soothe. He placed the grate back in front of the fire and then sat in front of it. Around him, the dogs began to settle in their beds, and Winston dropped on the floor next to Will, tail wagging slowly in the firelight.

Hannibal shifted forward again, carefully nearing the fire before sitting next to Will. He curled his legs close to him, watching the fire closely as it danced behind the grate. Will couldn't help but look over at him as he settled. The firelight danced against his skin, lighting it up in an almost wicked manner. His antlers seemed to stretch to the ceiling, and where the firelight touched them, they seemed to stretch further and further, claiming everything that led to Will's bed.

Hannibal turned to look at him then pointed at the fire.

Will raised an eyebrow, expectant, as their eyes met.

It's safe?

Will nodded. "The grate helps, and as long as I don't feed it much, it won't get out of control."

Hannibal nodded and looked at the fire again.

Will took a moment to study him. It was strange how easily such a creature could be seen as a monster, yet Hannibal had never tried to hurt him. He followed him, watched him, and even brought him gifts. Will glanced over Hannibal's shoulder to the flowers sitting on his bedside table and the memories of finding them every morning.

Hannibal followed Will's gaze, turning his head toward Will's bed. When he spotted the flowers, he turned back and pointed. Will felt his face heat slightly as he turned away, unable to make eye contact with Hannibal now. Hannibal leaned toward him, lowering his face and inhaling as he had done before. Will stayed still until Hannibal pulled away and then turned, glancing at the creature out of the corner of his eye. Hannibal was watching him, his face pensive.

"What?" Will asked.

Hannibal huffed, and Will turned completely, meeting his gaze again.

You kept them.

Will nodded and flushed again, turning his head away. He couldn't bear what Hannibal was going to say next, so instead, he stared at the flames in front of him.

"I kept them," He confirmed.

Hannibal leaned toward him again, lowering his head slightly. Will jumped at the sight of antlers suddenly in front of him and a chill that pressed against the side of his head. Then Hannibal withdrew slowly, carefully lifting his antlers away from Will's view.

It took Will a moment to realize what had happened. That Hannibal had just pressed his forehead against the side of Will's head. Will dropped his eyes from the fire to his lap, unable to fully comprehend the feelings such a simple action spurred. Hannibal, however, didn't seem to notice, or at least didn't let on that he did, as he turned back to the fire, watching it.

Eventually, Hannibal stretched out his legs, his hooves placed in front of the fire. Then he stretched out his hands, palms toward the flames. Will's lips twitched as he realized that Hannibal was warming himself up. Will turned to look at the dogs around them, most of them asleep. Winston, however, was still awake at Will's side, tail swishing lightly. Will reached for him, stroking his now soft head. Hannibal watched him then looked at one of the dogs.

He pointed at the closest then turned to Will expectantly.

"Jack," Will said. "His name is Jack."

They repeated as Hannibal pointed to one dog and then another, and Will told him the names of each. Then he began pointing at other things in the house, the fireplace, the piano, the bookshelf, and Will told him the words for each. Hannibal had said that there were words he didn't know, and Will couldn't help but think that a lot of those words were related to things inside a house.

Eventually, Hannibal stretched and looked back toward the door, face falling slightly.

He thought Will was going to make him leave.

Will's heart ached at the idea, at the thought of Hannibal thinking he had no choice but to leave, that Will would make him.

"You can stay," Will said, his voice sounding small even to him.

Hannibal turned to him.

"Stay the night, I mean. You can sleep here. You don't need to leave."

Hannibal's face lit up, and he nodded, looking at the space around him as though he was looking for a place to sleep.

"Hold on," Will said, and Hannibal turned to him. "You can sleep on the couch. I'll just- give me a minute."

Hannibal watched him as he stood, eyes following him as he left the room. Will could still feel the weight of his gaze even as he ventured upstairs to grab a spare pillow and blanket. He didn't even know if Hannibal would use them or want them, but he would offer them anyway. But he didn't know why.

He was never like this with someone else. He hated people in his living space, barely tolerated eye contact, and never once had he let someone spend the night unless there was no other choice. And now he was letting a creature he barely knew, who could probably kill him, stay on his couch.

When he ventured back downstairs, he caught a glimpse of Hannibal petting Winston. He wasn't as gentle as Will, though Will couldn't help but think that he was being as gentle as he could. Hannibal's long, clawed fingers ran down Winston's body before he picked up his hand and pressed it against Winston's head. Winston's tail thumped, and his tongue hung out of his mouth at the feeling.

It was that, the simple act of Hannibal being gentle with something he could easily kill, that made Will think he was willing to let Hannibal spend the night. He stepped further into the room, drawing Hannibal's attention. White eyes shot to him, and Hannibal raised himself slightly, not letting himself stand up all the way but kneeling in Will's living room.

Will stepped closer and held out the blankets and pillows. Hannibal cocked his head.

Will smiled slightly, then set the pillow and blankets down on the chair closest to him.

"It's a pillow," He said, taking the pillow in hand. "It's to rest your head on while you sleep." Will walked toward the couch and placed the pillow on one side of the couch, making sure to place the pillow on the side that would give Hannibal more room for his antlers. Then he walked back and picked up the blanket. "This just to cover you. In case you're cold." Will wrapped the blanket around himself, demonstrating.

Hannibal nodded and then reached for the blanket when Will offered it to him. Then he moved closer, crawling closer to Will then kneeling in front of him. He unfolded the blanket and took it in hand before reaching around Will, tugging the blanket around his shoulders. Will shuddered at the cold as Hannibal pressed the blanket against his shoulders, looking at him expectantly.

Will smiled, almost shyly, before ducking his head and removing the blanket.

"I have blankets," He told Hannibal, reaching up to tug the blanket around Hannibal's shoulders. "This is for you."

Hannibal blinked at him, then shuffled closer again, this time pressing his forehead against Will's. Will shivered, and Hannibal pulled away.

I know you don't like to be touched. I can tell. Hannibal said when their eyes met. *But thank you.*

Will nodded, swallowing a lump in his throat.

"Uh- the couch should be comfortable enough. I can turn up the heat, and the fire will die out on its own." Hannibal jumped at the word die, but Will shook his head. "It's just what happens when the fire goes out. It's ok."

Hannibal nodded, then crawled back through the room, the blanket still wrapped around him. It was barely big enough to cover him, but Hannibal didn't seem to care as he crawled onto the couch then looked at Will expectantly. Will nodded, and Hannibal settled himself, gently placing his head on the pillow Will set for him.

Will swallowed thickly again, then moved toward his own bed, slipping off the pants he wore and tugging on a pair of sweatpants. Normally, he slept in only his t-shirt and briefs, but he felt the need to cover himself more with Hannibal in the house.

When Will tucked himself into bed, he found himself staring toward the couch where Hannibal lay, hooves hanging off one edge and antlers off the other. The sight made Will smile again as he tugged the blankets of his bed up to his shoulders and closed his eyes.

He barely felt like he was asleep when something cold touched his cheek.

Will's eyes shot open, heart pounding, and breathing heavily. Behind his eyes, he could see flashes of red and twisted bodies. When he looked down at his own hands, wet from sweat,

he could have sworn they were covered in blood. Yet with the next blink, they were fine again, normal.

"Will."

Will jumped at the sound of his name, eyes searching wildly for the source until he found Hannibal crouched next to the bed, white eyes staring at him.

"S-sorry," Will said, chest still heaving. He pulled himself up more in bed, sitting up. Hannibal crawled closer before he began to look Will over, searching carefully. He tugged at Will's blankets, dragging them off Will's body as he looked over him, clawed hands pulling at Will's sweatpants to twist his legs. "I'm-" Will began, and Hannibal's eyes shot to his.

Hurt?

Will shook his head. "No. It was just a nightmare."

Hannibal cocked his head.

"A dream?" Will asked, wondering if that was word Hannibal knew. At that, Hannibal nodded. "But a bad one."

Hannibal shuffled closer again, sitting at Will's bedside.

A nightmare is a bad dream?

Will nodded.

You were panting and sounded like you were in pain. I worried something hurt you.

Will shook his head. "It's not like that. It's just-" He sighed. How could he even begin to explain what happened or why he had the nightmares he did.

What did you see?

Will looked away, staring at his hands. "Death. Darkness. Blood. There was a lot of blood."

"Will," Hannibal said, making Will look at him again.

You're safe. I will protect you.

Will huffed and sighed. "It's not me I'm worried about."

You think you will hurt someone.

Will nodded.

Do you want to hurt someone?

"It doesn't matter if I did or not," Will huffed, trying not to let himself snap at Hannibal. He didn't know human laws or why it would be wrong. "I couldn't."

Rules? Hannibal asked.

Will nodded.

Hannibal shuffled closer still until he was pressed against the edge of the bed. *I will protect you.*

"Hannibal-"

Hannibal shook his head then looked at Will once more, making eye contact. *I will protect you.*

Will swallowed and nodded, knowing there was no way Hannibal would relent on this. Will looked around them, looking at the dogs who were still asleep. He could just see the edge of Winston, who looked like he was on his back in front of the now dark fireplace. Hannibal looked over his shoulder at them, then back to Will. Then he pointed at the pillow and gestured for Will to lie down. He obeyed, watching as Hannibal crawled back across the room toward the couch. Instead of lying down, though, he crawled back on the couch and stared out the window.

"You can go back to sleep; I'm ok," Will said.

Hannibal turned to him then pointed at the pillow again before turning back toward the window, staring out into the night.

Will watched Hannibal for a moment, seeing the differences in the way the moonlight bathed his skin over the firelight. The fire had made him look menacing, but the moonlight made him look serene. It bathed his skin in a soft glow that outlined his face well. Will could see his cheekbones and the jut of his jaw even from where he was across the room.

Hannibal stayed on the couch, apparently keeping vigil while Will drifted off to sleep once again, unaware that sleep was coming until it claimed him once more.

Chapter 7

In the morning, Will woke to the dogs sniffing around him and his phone ringing on the bedside table. Hannibal was staring at the phone like it personally offended him as Will managed to drag himself upward. He ignored his phone, knowing whoever was calling would call him back as he stretched and pet the dogs closest to him. When the phone stopped ringing, Hannibal looked less offended as he looked up at Will.

His lips pulled back in a smile, and Will smiled back, still wiping the sleep from his eyes.

His phone began to ring again, and Will huffed. Then he stood, taking the phone off the charger before walking to the front door.

"Graham," He practically barked through the phone as he opened the front and screen doors to let the dogs barrel through. They ran into the yard, falling over each other as they ran forward while Hannibal behind him watched him, moving closer slowly. Will held the door open as he yawned, letting Hannibal step through it before him. Then he moved to the chair on the porch, settling into it with another yawn.

Hannibal sat on the porch, seeming to watch the dogs, but Will knew he was watching him.

"Are you listening to me?" A voice demanded from the other side, forcing Will's attention back to the phone.

"Yeah," He muttered through another yawn. "Lead on the Angel Maker and the location where he might be."

Jack muttered something else on the other end before sighing. "Do you want to come to Quantico or meet me there?"

Will let his head fall back against the chair, blinking at the roof above him. "I'll meet you."

"Get going then."

The phone beeped as the conversation ended.

"Morning to you too," Will grumbled, letting his hand fall.

"Will."

Will dragged his head forward again, meeting white eyes across the porch.

What was that?

"My boss," Will huffed. "There's a killer on the loose who makes angels out of devils." Hannibal cocked his head in question. "He skins them, takes part of the skin of their back, and makes it look like wings. Like of a bird. And he does it to people who have done bad things."

Is that who you hunt? Hannibal asked.

"How did you know?"

Hannibal's lips twitched, and Will could hear his answer without him ever saying it. He knew.

Will opened the door to let the dogs and Hannibal back inside before moving toward the kitchen to make his coffee.

The case he had been working on was the furthest thing from his mind for the last few days. Hannibal had occupied it more than anything. Will had barely paid attention at the crime scenes, seeing the bodies left behind and the angels made. If he thought any differently than he did, he would have missed essential pieces to the crime scenes. But Will could often occupy more than one train of thought at once, even if most of his thoughts were dedicated to Hannibal.

He looked at Hannibal, who had followed him into the kitchen.

"Coffee," Will said.

Hannibal cocked his head.

"It's a morning drink. And usually my breakfast."

At that, Hannibal huffed the same human-sounding huff that Will had heard before.

"Well, what do you have for breakfast?" Will asked as he poured himself a cup.

More than that.

Will smirked to himself before looking away and then back at Hannibal again. "Do you want a cup?" Hannibal leaned forward and sniffed the coffee, then shook his head. Will chuckled. "I'm sure you'd prefer the fancier stuff." He told Hannibal, who didn't react one way or another.

Hannibal watched as Will drank the first cup of coffee then poured the rest in a travel mug.

"I have to-," He began, turning to look at Hannibal. "I have to get ready."

Hannibal nodded and crawled back through the kitchen into the living room, then climbed back on the couch. He stared back outside as he did the night before, giving Will a chance to navigate around the house without Hannibal watching his every move. Will took his clothes into the bathroom with him, taking a quick shower and dressing in the bathroom's humidity. His hair was barely dry by the time he stepped out. Hannibal turned to him immediately, instantly curious about Will following the shower. He climbed off the couch and shuffled forward, once again pressing closer to inhale Will's scent.

This time, though, he looked offended as he pulled away, eyes narrowing.

"Guess you don't like my aftershave," Will muttered, somewhat amused. Hannibal didn't seem anywhere near as amused.

Will made breakfast for the dogs while Hannibal watched, then refilled their water and let them out once more before he was ready to leave.

"What are you going to do today?" Will asked as he pulled on his jacket.

Hannibal blinked at him, then cocked his head. Then he shuffled closer and pointed at Will.

"I have to go over a state to see if we can find a killer. Elliot Buddish." Hannibal cocked his head again. "Like you said. Killers are who I hunt."

Hannibal nodded then pointed to the front door. It was Will's turn to nod as he opened the door for them, letting Hannibal step through the screen door before he followed. Hannibal stretched once he was away from Will's roof, standing to his full height. To his head, he wasn't much taller than Will, only a few inches between them. But his antlers were massive and enough to force him to crouch even in Will's house.

He looked at Will then looked over at his car before pointing away from Will's property.

"I'll be back tonight. You can come back if you want," He paused. "To stay, I mean."

Hannibal smiled then looked out toward the trees, his gaze almost longing.

"It's ok. I'll see you tonight," Will encouraged, wondering if Hannibal had even eaten before he brought Winston. Had he spent the whole night hungry just to stay at Will's side?

Hannibal looked back at Will and smiled. Then, between blinks, he was gone.

Will didn't know what to expect when he arrived at the farm where Elliot Buddish had nearly died years ago. But certainly, he wasn't expecting to find the killer himself hanging from the rafters with his skin splayed as it had been for each of the victims.

Will remembered why, before Hannibal entered the picture; he had been so focused on the killers and why for a while he thought he might not be able to continue doing what he was. Yet now, looking at Buddish's body, it didn't affect him the way he had before. In fact, Buddish was one of the first killers who hadn't run amok in Will's mind. As he stared at the newest angel above him, the final act of a dying man, he knew something was different already.

Next to him, Jack sighed and eventually turned around, leaving Will with the body of a killer who had made his final kill himself.

Will stared at him, wondering what Buddish would see if he were still alive to look at Will. Would he see the darkness in Will as he had others? Or would Will have been able to slip by unnoticed, just as he had by everyone else? Or, well, mostly everyone else.

Will didn't even need to look when he felt a presence appear at his side.

Hannibal looked up at the body with him, head cocking this way and that as he tried to make sense of what he was seeing. Part of Will was amused at Hannibal's curiosity, but another part of him felt something else, something that had Will aching, knowing that Hannibal had followed him across state lines.

Hannibal pointed a clawed finger at the body, a question on his mind that Will couldn't hear, but he understood anyway.

"That's the killer," He told Hannibal. "The Angel Maker. Elliot Buddish."

Hannibal seemed to tense next to him, head twisting and eyes darting. Will turned to him, their eyes meeting.

Danger?

Will shook his head then turned back toward the body. "No danger. He did it himself."

Hannibal cocked his head.

"He had cancer," Will explained. "An abnormal growth. Except this was in his brain. It changed how he thought, how he saw people. He could see other killers, and he made them into something better. And then he did it to himself. Suicide."

Hannibal tensed again, though this time, he wasn't looking around. He was staring at Will.

"My father had cancer too," Will continued, though he didn't know why. "I know the toll it takes. He tried to fight, though."

"Will." The way Hannibal said his name was softer than usual, enough to cause Will to tense himself as he looked at Hannibal.

That could happen to you?

Will nodded.

And Hannibal shook his head, stepping closer.

No. Not to you.

Will smiled at him somewhat sadly. When it came to suicide, he knew he had a choice. But cancer didn't care. It would take anyone and everyone.

I will protect you. Hannibal insisted, just as he had the night before.

Will resisted the urge to reach for him. Hannibal, however, didn't have the same hesitation. He leaned forward like he had the night before, gently pressing his forehead against Will's.

Safe. He said to Will when he pulled away.

"Will!" Jack called from outside, making Hannibal tense again.

"You should go," Will urged, suddenly frantic. What would happen if Jack saw Hannibal? He would kill him. Hannibal studied Will. "It's ok. I'll see you back at my house. But if he sees you-"

At that, Hannibal nodded, seeming to understand.

"Go," Will urged.

Between blinks, Hannibal was gone.

Will turned around and exited, greeting Jack with no more than a grunt before returning to his car. Will didn't even care what Jack had to say before he was on his way. The only solace Will felt as he drove him was catching glimpses of antlers as Hannibal followed him, running alongside Will's car on the drive back.

At some point, Hannibal veered off. Will tried not to feel anything about that as he watched antlers disappear into the trees. Hannibal would be back, he told himself. He always came back.

Will drove home, letting the dogs out the moment he arrived. The dogs were ecstatic, and Will was grateful to see that his house was in one piece, not destroyed either by or because of the presence of a new dog. Winston seemed to do well with the pack, playing with them in the grass. Will watched as the dogs rolled over each other before dropping into a playful stance then running off. Will threw one of the toys on the porch toward them, watching as one leapt into the air to grab it and was immediately accosted by the others for it.

He smiled to himself.

Unfortunately, that smile didn't last.

A car slowly rolled down his driveway, and inside was a familiar face. One that Will had been romantically inclined toward for years now, yet as she stepped from her car, Will realized his feelings had faded.

"Hello, Alana," He greeted. "What can I do for you?"

Alana smiled as she neared him, bright blue eyes shining in the evening light.

"Jack called. He said you were weird at the crime scene today. He wanted me to check on you."

Will huffed, internally annoyed. "I'm surprised he noticed."

Alana raised an eyebrow. "You think he doesn't pay attention?"

"I think most people think I'm weird, so it's not unusual."

Alana smiled again at that as she moved to Will's porch, stepping up onto it next to him.

"Are you all right, Will?"

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" She asked, shifting slightly as though she was trying to make eye contact with him. Unlike Hannibal, though, Will didn't let her.

"I'm fine," He repeated. "There wasn't anything for me to do at the crime scene. He killed himself. Pretty simple."

"That can't be easy to see either," Alana said, reaching forward to squeeze his arm.

"Nothing I can do about it."

"Will," Alana sighed. "Just because you couldn't save this one doesn't mean you haven't done good things. But the good also doesn't mean you keep pushing yourself until you break."

"I'm not that fragile, Alana."

Will sighed to himself. She was always like this with him, friendly but under it was a veneer of psychiatric curiosity and the unwavering belief that he was too unstable to exist in the world. Even if she didn't see him as dangerous, she and Jack both saw him as easily broken, and that annoyed Will more than anything else. He could tolerate them pointing him like a bloodhound to their next target, Jack especially. But turning around and treating him like he was already broken or nearly there after putting him in situations broken people couldn't handle made Will angry.

"I just worry about you," Alana said, turning Will and pulling him closer.

She wrapped her arms around him, hugging him closely for a moment.

But Will wasn't focused on the hug.

As she turned him, he caught a glimpse of antlers and a bright flash of flowers.

Hannibal.

Will pulled himself from Alana's grasp as the flowers fell to the ground, and Hannibal vanished as though he hadn't been there at all.

Chapter 8

Will pulled away from Alana so fast; it was as though he'd been shocked. Alana's eyes widened as she looked at him, surprised by his sudden withdraw from her. On the other hand, Will was still staring where Hannibal had once been, his heart pounding in his chest.

"I just-" He began, turning to whistle for his dogs. "I just remembered that I have to let out my neighbors' dogs."

It was a flimsy excuse; both he and Alana knew it. But Will wasn't staying around to listen to Alana question him on it. The dogs ran to the door, barreling past Alana as though she wasn't even there. Will glanced at them as they entered, falling over each other to settle into their beds. Will shut the door behind them, turning to Alana.

"I'll see you later," He muttered, gesturing her off the porch.

"O-oh. Ok." Alana stuttered, surprised by his sudden frenzy.

Will didn't even bother locking the door behind him as he walked Alana off the porch.

"I can give you a ride-" Alana began as Will walked the other direction.

Will waved her off as he walked toward the trees, eyes glued to the flowers he could see lying at their trunks. Alana said something to him, but he didn't notice or care as he nearly trotted toward the flowers, bending to pick up the flowers. There were more than normal, a whole bouquet. He didn't recognize most of the flowers, but he did notice the same red tulip and red roses amongst the flowers. He tucked the flowers into his jacket, carefully placing the stems in one pocket so they would be heated by his body rather than die in the cold.

He didn't even bother looking over his shoulder to look to see if Alana was gone before he stepped into the trees. Instantly, the world around him darkened from the early evening light into near darkness. There was just enough filtering through the trees, though, that he could see hoofprints. It seemed Hannibal had walked over his own tracks to leave because Will could see only one set of hoofprints, yet their shapes were odd.

Will followed the hoofprints, ducking around wayward branches that threatened to hit him as he walked.

His walking, though, soon became trotting, and that trotting became all-out running as he followed the hoofprints.

"Hannibal!" He called into the world around him, hoping that maybe he could hear Will and would come.

It was only a hope, though, as he thought about Hannibal dropping the flowers. Why would Hannibal come to him if he thought he saw something he didn't? What did Hannibal even think he saw? Will nearly ran into a tree branch as he thought, his mind no longer focused on

the world around him as much as he was focused on trying to understand what Hannibal thought he saw. Will noticed the branch at the last moment, though, ducking it just in time. A few strands of his hair tangled in the branch, but Will didn't care as he tugged free, still following the hoofprints.

"Hannibal!" He called again, pausing for a moment in his steps to see if he could catch sight of familiar antlers or at least branches that seemed to move.

Yet, he saw nothing.

That didn't stop him, though.

Part of him wondered why he was so determined to find the creature, why he had shrugged off Alana so quickly when he had once thought he had feelings for her. Truthfully, he didn't think he had those same feelings anymore. Maybe that was for the best. Alana would always look at him like he was broken, and Will didn't want to feel like a toy to be used and thrown away once the novelty wore off.

Hannibal, however, didn't look at him that way. Maybe that was why he was chasing the creature. Because strangely enough, the one person who could understand him the most was the one thing everyone else would see as a monster. But he wasn't a monster to Will.

He wrapped one arm around his midsection carefully, hugging the flowers closer to himself but not enough to crush them.

"Hannibal!"

Will still failed to glimpse familiar antlers or white eyes and followed the hoofprints through the trees.

Eventually, the trees in front of him began to thin, and Will heard the distinct trickle of water. He continued forward, following the hoofprints still. Will's eyes scanned ahead, looking for the source of the water but, more importantly, looking for Hannibal.

Will came to the stream before he ever caught sight of Hannibal. The hoofprints stopped at the water, and Will sighed, seeing what would likely be a freezing stream between him and the hoofprints that resumed on the other side. He looked around the stream, hoping to catch sight of Hannibal before he had to wade in. He didn't have waders or anything to protect him from the cold. It was only him and his otherwise thin shoes against the stream. It wasn't very deep, but Will could see immediately that the water would come up to his ankles.

"Hannibal!" He tried again, calling into the distance and hoping that maybe he could shake the creature's resolve.

Yet when no response came, and Hannibal didn't materialize from the trees, Will knew he had no choice. He hugged himself tighter, still wary of the flowers, as he sucked in a breath, trying as best he could to prepare himself for the water.

It was freezing as he stepped foot in it at first, the cold shooting up Will's leg until it settled in his heart. He muttered a series of curses but didn't allow himself to jump away. Instead, he stepped his other foot into the water, trying to take as large a step as he could to navigate the stream faster. Will's heart hammered, and the rest of his body felt like it was on fire as he took his next step, pulling his foot out of the water and then freezing himself again when he stepped back in. He knew the risks; he knew what could happen if he slipped or if he didn't make it home in time as the cold clung to his feet. But none of that seemed to matter as much as finding Hannibal.

It only took him two more steps to reach the other side of the stream, but the cold had thoroughly settled in his bones by the time he did. Will's steps were smaller as he followed the new set of prints, hoping that the end would lead them to Hannibal.

His eyes darted everywhere, even as he began to shiver, feeling the cold that dug into his ankles and the water that squelched out of his shoes with every step.

"H-Hannibal!"

Will trudged forward, curling his toes in his shoes just to keep blood flowing. The air around him seemed to cool significantly in the time since he left his house, and Will wondered how Hannibal had managed in temperatures likely even colder than this for so long.

On Will's next step, he thought he caught a glimpse of branches moving out of the corner of his eye.

He turned, not paying attention to where his foot went as he stepped.

Suddenly, the ground was flying out from under him. He reached for something to steady him as he fell, seeing the branches around him morph into the branches above him and the darkening sky above that.

The last thing he saw was a bird flying overhead before his head collided with something hard and his vision went black.

Will woke in darkness.

His head throbbed, and his feet felt like they were on fire, but all he could think about as he peeled his eyes open was Hannibal. Immediately, he began searching for whoever found him.

"Hannibal," He croaked, his voice raw, likely from the cold.

Around him, the world seemed the spring to life in the darkness as a figure moved toward him. He heard the sound of claws scraping on what sounded like a wood floor before the figure was in front of him. Will sucked in a breath as they reached out, and a cold hand pressed against his forehead.

"Will."

Will breathed a sigh of relief, hearing Hannibal's familiar voice. He tried to push himself up, realizing now he was in a bed. Hannibal, however, seemed to have other ideas as he gently pushed Will back down, drawing up the blankets that had fallen from his chest.

Will's eyes darted around, trying to orient himself to where he was.

It was his house, he realized, as the sounds of claws scratching on the floor belonged to his dogs who were standing at the edge of the bed, not yet jumping up but would given the chance. Will pulled an arm free from the blankets, only to be met with Hannibal, who gently pushed his arm back down.

"The light," Will said, trying again to reach for the lamp on his bedside table.

Hannibal pushed his arm down again then reached for the light himself, the outline of his arm the only thing Will could see.

He winced when the lamp turned on, but it was worth it as he finally saw Hannibal in front of him. He was crouched as he was the night before, kneeling at Will's bedside. He shifted closer to the bed as Will looked at him, white eyes focused on Will.

Will turned to look at himself, assessing the damage from his fall. Hannibal, it seemed, had figured out how to take off his jacket and his shoes because both were sitting by the front door. HIs tugged the blankets down slightly, looking for scratches. Yet again, Hannibal pulled the blankets back up, covering Will once more.

Will turned to protest, but when their eyes met, Hannibal spoke.

You injured your head. I didn't see any bleeding, but I would prefer you rest.

"Hannibal," Will said, letting his head drop onto the pillow as he looked at the creature next to him. He caught a glimpse of the flowers on his bedside table, not yet put in the glass with the others, but there nonetheless. "You didn't have to run."

I did not want to interrupt you and your...mate.

"Mate?" Will asked, incredulous. "She's not- I'm not- we're not-" Will tried, several thoughts trying to leave his mouth all at once and tangling themselves along the way. He huffed before taking in a slow breath. "She's not my mate."

She touched you. I thought- Hannibal trailed off, but Will shook his head.

"She's a friend. If you had asked me a month ago if I wanted more, I might have said yes, but now-"

You no longer desire her?

"Not anymore," Will confirmed.

Hannibal nodded before reaching for Will's head, lifting him slightly, and evaluating him. When he seemed satisfied, he gently placed Will's head back on the pillow and withdrew.

"Do you-" Will began, watching as Hannibal settled next to him. "Do you have a mate?"

No.

"Oh," Will said, not knowing what else to say. They were silent for a moment before Will spoke again. "What about family? Are there others like you?"

I had a family. Once. My parents died when I was young, and my sister- Hannibal paused. *She was killed.*

"I'm so sorry," Will said, finding that for the first time, he meant the words when he said them.

As for others like me, Hannibal continued. *There are quite a few, though I have never found a place among them.*

"You're alone?"

No more than you.

Will nodded, understanding more than he wished he could at that moment.

My species is not like yours. We do not keep to ourselves the same way.

"What do you mean?"

Your species tends to stay amongst their own kind. Mine does not.

"Do you mean like mates?" Will asked.

Friends. Mates. My species does not limit itself. My uncle formed a mating bond with a human.

"What's a mating bond?"

Hannibal looked away from him for a moment, a pensive look crossing his face before their eyes met again.

It is an intimate bond between two partners. It binds two individuals together for life, not just in spirit but in body, blood, minds. Once the bond is made, neither can take another mate.

"Oh," Will said. "We're not like that."

No?

Will shook his head. "Humans like to claim they're monogamous, but-" He paused. "You wouldn't believe how many crime scenes I went to because one partner cheated on another."

Hannibal cocked his head.

"Took another lover," Will explained. He sighed to himself. "People date, try to find someone for them. But it's hard. And there's no guarantee it will last. Marriages end."

Have you tried to find someone?

Will shrugged. "Not many people like me. They find me weird or unstable."

I don't.

At that, Will smiled. "You're one of a few."

Hannibal smiled back at him.

What is your mating ritual like?

Will shrugged. "It's not really a ritual. It's a ceremony. People say vows, exchange rings, make promises."

Did your parents make promises?

Will scoffed. "My parents? No. They had me without marrying, and my mom took off when I was younger. I never knew her."

I'm sorry. Hannibal said, pressing against the bed to move closer.

Will shrugged. "It's all right." Hannibal watched him for a moment, and Will felt the odd need to turn away. He forced himself to stay, though, keeping eye contact. "What is your mating ritual like?"

It's formed through blood sharing, and both partners must consent. Once it is made, it cannot be broken except through death.

"Have you ever-"

No.

"How do you know?" Will asked. "How do you know that the person you want to form the bond with is the right one? What if you make it with someone who you end up hating?"

You know. Hannibal said, sounding confident.

Will swallowed thickly and looked away, staring at the ceiling above him.

"Will," Hannibal said softly.

Will turned toward him.

You came after me.

Will nodded.

Thank you.

A lump formed in his throat as he opened his mouth to answer but found he couldn't say anything. That seemed to be enough for Hannibal, though. He shifted, leaning forward to press his forehead against Will's as he had done the night before. Will's eyelids fluttered slightly, and a slow breath escaped his lips.

Hannibal withdrew and examined him again, turning Will's head back and forth.

You hit your head when you fell. I don't think it did any significant damage, but I will need to wake you during the night to make sure.

Will laughed lightly. "So concussion protocols are the same for your species as mine, huh?"

Hannibal cocked his head again.

"It's a type of damage from a head injury."

Hannibal nodded. *Perhaps we are more alike than you think.*

Will swallowed and looked away. Hannibal sat at his side for a few moments longer before he shifted, about to give Will his space.

"Hannibal," Will asked suddenly, causing him to turn back toward Will. "When your sister was killed, what did you do?"

Hannibal blinked, watching him with cunning, white eyes.

I found the men who did it. He paused briefly. *And I killed them all.*

Chapter 9

Will was exhausted the next morning. Waking up nearly every hour on the hour throughout the night did nothing for his exhaustion, and it was even worse on his headache. He poured himself out of bed in the morning before the sun came up, shuffling through the house, unable to do more than grunt. Hannibal watched him as he shuffled forward, first going to the bathroom then stopping by the thermostat to turn up the heat. He was freezing and exhausted, and everything around him looked like a blur.

He tried to move toward the front door to let the dogs out, but Hannibal stopped him, gently grasping his shoulders. Will tried to push forward again, but he wasn't having it. He redirected Will to the couch, sitting him down next to the blanket Will had given him before. Will blinked as he stared ahead of him, watching the blurry figures of the dogs as they stood. A chill ripped through the house, and Will turned, seeing Hannibal open the door and then the screen to let the dogs out. He crawled after them, standing to his full height just beyond the porch.

Will turned away, blinking again rapidly. Eventually, his eyes settled on the fireplace, and Will thought of the warmth a fire would bring. He crawled forward, head-spinning. Strangely, it was harder for him to remove the grate from the fireplace, but he wrestled it free. He added new logs to the fireplace, then struck a match, lighting it then the fire. It jarred to life in front of him, flames flickering and logs crackling as the fire began to eat away at them. Will tugged the grate back in place, fumbling for a second before another pair of hands grabbed it.

Hannibal placed the grate back, then tugged Will away, settling him on the floor in front of the fire where they had sat before. Will swayed slightly, then looked up at Hannibal, who watched him carefully.

Hannibal shifted after a moment, tugging the pillow down from the couch and then the blanket. Will protested immediately when Hannibal tried to wrap the blanket around him, and Hannibal relented then crawled across the living room toward Will's bed. Will heard the shift of fabric, and suddenly Hannibal was back at his side with another blanket. This one was from Will's bed. Will knew Hannibal hoped he wouldn't protest this one, and he sighed to himself. He was trying to help, and Will already wasn't making it easy. So, he let Hannibal drape the blanket around him. Then Hannibal reached for his own blanket and wrapped it around himself, looking to Will for approval.

Will couldn't help but smile, and Hannibal nodded, seeming satisfied.

They sat there for a while, the two of them quiet. Will still sway slightly, the blanket shifting around him.

After some time, he felt Hannibal reach for him, tugging him first closer and then down. Will let himself be moved until his head rested on a pillow, the same one Hannibal had pulled from the couch. He thought maybe he was lying on something else too, something under the pillow, but as he lay there, his eyelashes began fluttering. Hannibal was still briefly before

Will felt him shift. Then a clawed hand touched his head. He didn't feel as cold as he normally did as his hand pressed against Will's hair. He pulled his hand back gently then repeated. It took Will longer than he would like to admit to realize that Hannibal was gently stroking his curls.

Will shifted on the pillow, burrowing into it more.

Hannibal stroked his hair more, a soothing motion that had Will ready to sink back into sleep.

"Hannibal," He muttered, trying to turn slightly to see the creature above him. Hannibal didn't let him turn but said his name in that gentle way Will was becoming used to, telling him he was listening. "Thank you."

Hannibal shifted, and Will felt the backs of his knuckles graze his cheek. For some reason, the action felt familiar, but Will didn't question it as he settled closer. Hannibal tugged the blanket over him more then began to stroke his hair again.

Will drifted off to sleep feeling strangely warm.

When Will woke up again, he was in a different place. Instead of being on the floor where he had fallen asleep, Hannibal had moved him onto the couch, covering him again with the blanket from his bed and resting his head on the pillow Will had given him. Hannibal himself was sitting in front of the couch, watching the fire. His back was pressed against the edge of the couch, so Will was staring at his shoulder.

Will stared at him for a moment, inspecting what he could of Hannibal from the angle he was at. Hannibal hadn't noticed he was awake yet, giving Will a chance to study him without him knowing. Naturally, though, his stomach decided at that moment to alert Hannibal to his wakefulness.

Hannibal turned, shifting on the floor so he could face Will. Will turned slightly, following Hannibal's movements. Hannibal evaluated him, gently tugging at the blanket to look him over. When he seemed satisfied, he pulled the blanket back over Will then searched his face.

You look better than you did earlier.

Will nodded. "I'm just hungry now." Hannibal nodded then looked toward Will's kitchen. "I can make my own food."

I thought you said you didn't have breakfast food.

Will shrugged then, pushed himself upward. Hannibal followed him, carefully watching him as he sat up. Will blinked and stretched. Hannibal evaluated him then shifted back when Will stood. He stayed still for a moment, making sure he wouldn't tip over when he fell. Then he walked to the kitchen, feeling Hannibal follow him. He reached for the cabinet above his fridge, pulling down a prepackaged cup of oatmeal. Hannibal watched him, seeming curious about what he was doing. Will ran water over the oatmeal then shoved it in the microwave,

hitting the button automatically. Then he moved to the coffee pot to make himself some. At that, Hannibal tried to stop him, but Will continued anyway.

"Apparently, I'm grumpy without coffee," He warned Hannibal before starting the pot. "I won't drink it all."

Hannibal relented, shifting away as he watched the microwave. Will wondered if he had seen something like it before as the oatmeal slowly spun around the interior. The microwaved beeped, and Will withdrew the contents slowly. He could already feel the heat sinking through it as he set it down on the counter. As a child, he had grown used to plain oatmeal. It was cheap and easy to buy in bulk, which was why it was often more than one meal for a younger Will. Now, though, Will reached for the cabinet above the fridge again, pulling down some honey. He poured it over the oatmeal.

As he put the honey back, Hannibal leaned in, sniffing Will's breakfast. After a moment, he recoiled, a disgusted look on his face. Will chuckled and tugged a spoon from a nearby drawer. He took a bite to taste if there was enough honey before he scooped more onto the spoon.

"Don't knock it 'til you try it," He said, offering the spoon to Hannibal. "It's ok. Just don't bite through the spoon. The metal won't taste good."

Hannibal shifted closer, eyes focused intently on Will before leaning forward, taking the bite Will offered. Hannibal seemed pensive as he withdrew, tasting the flavors on his tongue. Will didn't even think about it as he scooped more oatmeal onto the spoon while he waited for Hannibal to finish with the bite he had.

Will had finished the cup's contents before Hannibal seemed to finish his bite, his jaw working as he tasted the flavors on his tongue.

Will rinsed out the cup then threw it in the recycling bin before washing off the spoon.

"So?"

It was interesting.

Will chuckled to himself. "I'll get better breakfast foods if it would make you happy."

Hannibal nodded once, seeming satisfied with Will's statement. Will finished washing the spoon, then poured himself a cup of coffee and returned to the living room, feeling Hannibal follow him. Hannibal gestured to the couch when he entered, pointing to the spot where Will just was. Will sat slowly, tugging the blankets up around him, clearing off a space on the couch. Hannibal looked at him, head cocked, then looked at the spot on the couch Will had opened for him. Will nodded and patted the spot next to him, offering it to Hannibal.

Hannibal crawled up next to him, settling on the couch and looking out the window.

"Are you hungry?" Will asked after a moment. "You can leave if you want. Go get food. Do whatever you want to do."

Hannibal turned back toward him, then shook his head. He moved closer to Will, reaching to stroke his cheek with the backs of his knuckles as he did before.

I want to stay with you.

"You need to eat, Hannibal," Will said. Then he took another sip of coffee and pushed himself upward. "What do you eat?" He asked over his shoulder as he walked back toward the kitchen, opening his fridge. He didn't have much, but he could make Hannibal something. Anything. Just so that he was fed.

"Will," Hannibal said from the other side of the refrigerator door.

Will looked up, eyes meeting Hannibal's.

Meat mostly. Fish. Anything.

Will nodded and pulled various things from the fridge. He wasn't a chef, but he could make do. Hopefully, Hannibal wasn't too picky. He essentially made meatloaf, a simple enough dish that could hopefully satisfy Hannibal, who had been at his side for the whole night. Will didn't even know when he last ate. Was it when Will gave him the fish? Did he eat before that? After that? Did he eat before following Will across state lines? Did he eat before he came back to find Alana hugging Will?

Hannibal guided him back to the couch when the meal was in the oven. Will didn't protest as he sat down, his head spinning. Hannibal sat at his side again, this time closer than he had before. Will looked around, trying to figure out something to do for the day. There was no way he could go into work feeling like he did, and he doubted Hannibal would let him work on his boat. His next class was tomorrow, and while he probably should prepare, he didn't really need to. So, there he was, sitting with Hannibal at his side and wondering what he would do for the rest of the day.

If Hannibal had his way, he would probably sleep.

The dogs didn't seem opposed to the idea as they were strewn across the living room, asleep. Winston was sleeping in front of the fire, lying on his back with his head stretched on the ground.

Will sighed, waiting for the timer he had set to go off. He knew Hannibal, living in the world, probably ate most of his meat raw, but that didn't mean Will was willing to take chances with something in the meat making him sick.

Part of him wondered why he cared so much about it, why he was so much nicer to Hannibal than he had ever been to anyone when the timer finally beeped. He pushed himself upward, feeling Hannibal follow him as he often did. He was careful when withdrawing the pan from the oven, the smell of the meal hitting him as he did. It wasn't bad; thankfully, Will worried he would ruin the meal and Hannibal would never trust him again. Someone else probably would have cooked it better, but Hannibal didn't seem to care as he looked between Will and the meal, his own stomach rumbling enough for Will to hear it.

He waited for a moment, letting it cool before he sliced it, setting more than a few pieces on a plate for Hannibal.

"There's more if you want it," Will said, turning away from Hannibal to look at the rest before turning back to find the meal gone.

Hannibal set the plate back on the counter, licking his lips.

"Are you still hungry?"

Hannibal paused, then nodded slowly. Will cut more until the whole loaf was sliced before offering it to Hannibal. Again, he barely looked away before the meal was gone, and this time Hannibal seemed satisfied.

"Was that enough?" Will asked, looking over at Hannibal.

Hannibal nodded then crawled around the counter until he was closer. Then he tugged Will, causing him to turn until they were face to face. Again, Hannibal shifted closer to him, pressing his forehead against Will's as he had done before. Will let out a breath at the feeling before Hannibal pulled away and gestured for Will to go back to the couch.

"I need to do the dishes," Will said, but Hannibal didn't care.

He pushed Will lightly, directing him toward the couch. Will sighed and obeyed. Hannibal crawled back up next to him, watching out the window once more. Will wondered if he was missing the outside world when Hannibal turned to him again.

Safe. Was all he said before he pointed to the pillow, gesturing for Will to lay down again. Will huffed and obeyed, his earlier prediction coming true. He curled onto his side with Hannibal at his feet. Hannibal pulled the blankets over him once more, then reached for his own discarded blanket, tugging it around him. When he seemed satisfied, he turned toward the fire, watching it dance.

Will turned too, watching the flames until his eyes grew tired.

He didn't even realize he had fallen asleep until he woke up once again. The sun was high in the sky, likely early afternoon. Will had been moved again in his sleep, though this time, he was lying on a pillow once again on something else. When he looked, he saw the pillow was on Hannibal's lap. His hand rested on Will's shoulder, but his eyes were closed. Will twitched a little more, curious if Hannibal would react, but he didn't. He was asleep.

Will smiled slightly, carefully extracting himself from Hannibal's grasp.

Strangely, he was easy enough to move, and soon Will placed Hannibal on his side, the pillow under his cheek. He covered Hannibal with his blanket and then with the one Will removed from his bed.

Hannibal looked peaceful in his sleep, and Will was careful not to disturb him. He left him there, asleep on his couch, while Will let the dogs out and eventually curled up in front of a

renewed fire, book in hand. Behind him, Hannibal still slept, but now and then, Will could hear one word uttered in his sleep.

"Will."

Chapter 10

For two weeks following Will's head injury, he and Hannibal fell into more of a routine. Every morning, Will would wake up and make the dogs' food and breakfast, having stuck to his promise to Hannibal to buy better food. Then they would let the dogs out. On the mornings Will had to leave for a crime scene or to teach, they would bid each other goodbye until inevitably Hannibal popped up wherever Will was. Then Will would go home, and when he arrived, Hannibal would already be there, waiting for him on his porch. Will would let the dogs out again, which usually entailed a walk with Hannibal, the two of them walking side by side as the dogs trotted around them. Then they would return to the house where Will would make them dinner. Then the two of them would usually sit in front of the fire, doing something. Will worked on his boat, and Hannibal would sometimes read or work on something that Will couldn't see. Then, when the time came, both would head to bed.

The first change either of them encountered in their routine was during the night. Every night, Will would fall asleep with Hannibal on the couch, yet in the morning, Hannibal was closer. He had taken to grabbing the blanket and pillow from the couch and shifting closer and closer to Will, lying on the floor next to Will's bed where he would find him in the morning.

He couldn't explain why seeing Hannibal constantly moving closer during the night made his heart flutter in his chest. It happened over and over during those two weeks, and every time, Will wondered why it happened. Why the sight of Hannibal curled up under a blanket next to Will's bed made him feel the way it did.

Hannibal, however, never seemed to struggle with feelings the same way Will did.

The other change came in how they communicated. At first, in order for Will to hear Hannibal's answers to his questions, he needed to make eye contact. Lately, though, the eye contact wasn't as necessary. The first time it happened, it surprised Will so much it made him jump. It was the simplest thing, too; Will had only asked Hannibal what he wanted for dinner. He knew Hannibal's response wasn't going to be too specific, but he heard the answer before he ever made eye contact.

That was the only thing that seemed to surprise Hannibal as much as Will, the fact that they could communicate with each other without the necessity of eye contact.

Since then, it was something they practiced more and more, as each grew used to each other. There were some things that they still needed to make eye contact to communicate. The more complex answers or long-winded answers needed eye contact, but short or straightforward sentences were easier. Hannibal's voice echoed in his mind, quiet at first without eye contact but louder and louder as they practiced.

With it came a new sense of connection with Hannibal that Will had never experienced with anyone else. No one else had ever seen him, understood him, talked to him the way Hannibal did. Hannibal was the one person in his life who never treated him like a weapon to be

brandished or a broken toy. Hannibal treated him better than that, he was still careful, as he always was around Will, but Will could tell it came from a different place than everyone else.

For Hannibal, his carefulness was directly related to how he saw Will, not as something to be used or easily broken, but something better than that.

And that made it easier for Will. It was easier to connect with Hannibal, to see Hannibal just like how he saw everyone else. Except with them, he never wanted to dive into their brains; he never wanted their darkness clinging to him. But he knew Hannibal's darkness; it was almost familiar. It was Hannibal's light, though, the good side, the kindness, the gentleness, that was foreign initially, that made him fear Hannibal at first. Now, it was as familiar and easy as breathing, and Will found himself wanting more and more.

This morning, though, proved to be a deviation from the routine the two of them had built as they stayed together in Will's house.

Will wasn't woken by the patter of claws on the floor from anxious dogs or a phone call but instead from the smell of food cooking.

Will's eyelids fluttered open as he inhaled, his stomach rumbling. In the kitchen, he heard something clatter, and he shot upright. Around him, the dogs didn't seem to care, all of them far too focused on the meals in front of them. Meals that were somehow already made without Will having made them.

"Hannibal?" He called, tugging the blankets from around his waist.

"Will," Hannibal said, peaking out of the kitchen. He crawled closer, gripping Will's shoulder and pushing him down. Then he withdrew and gestured for Will to stay. Will obeyed, and another clatter came from the kitchen.

Then there was silence.

After a moment, Hannibal reappeared, except this time, he purposefully hid halfway behind the doorway. He looked at Will, white eyes finding his.

Close your eyes and hold out your hands.

Will huffed but obeyed, closing his eyes and holding out his hands. He heard shuffling before cool hands, no longer as cold as they once were, touched his, bringing his hands closer together. Then something warm was placed in them. He could feel when Hannibal withdrew and when those white eyes hovered on him expectantly.

"Will."

Will opened his eyes to find that the warm thing in his hands was a plate, and on it was breakfast, piled high and still steaming. Will's jaw dropped open as he looked at the food in front of him, eggs, bacon, and potatoes. They were a little burnt around the edges, but Will didn't care. All he could think of at that moment was how no one beyond his father had ever

made him breakfast before. No one had ever cared about him enough to do so; no one ever stayed with him long enough to show him this kind of care before.

Will looked up at Hannibal, emotions clogging his throat. Hannibal watched him carefully, shuffling forward when he sensed Will's distress. Will set the meal aside, carefully placing it on the bed next to him before gesturing Hannibal closer. Hannibal obeyed, face falling slightly. Maybe he thought Will was mad, but Will was far from it. He reached for Hannibal, gently cupping one side of his face to tug him closer. Hannibal moved as he was bid until he was close enough for Will to lean forward, pressing his forehead against Hannibal's as Hannibal had done to him. That action seemed to perk Hannibal up as he shifted closer still, the two of them staying in that position for a little longer.

Then Will pulled back and turned toward the meal Hannibal had made him.

"You didn't destroy my kitchen to make this did you?"

Hannibal seemed to smirk and shook his head before retrieving a meal of his own. His lacked the potatoes, but otherwise, everything else was the same as Will's. Together, the two of them ate breakfast together mostly in silence, with the dogs around them enjoying their own.

Will then went to the kitchen to clean up, finding that it was still very clean, while Hannibal let the dogs out.

Naturally, Will's strangely domestic morning took an annoying turn when he received a phone call from Jack about their newest case. A stack of bodies, piled high and tied together in a pillar. Will sighed but agreed to go, looking out the window at the dreary morning ahead of him.

Hannibal stepped back inside, eyeing Will closely as he tugged on a sweater.

"New case. Jack wants me there," Will huffed.

Hannibal crawled closer, turning Will's head so they could make eye contact.

Why you?

"What do you mean?"

Why do you have to put yourself out there for them? I've seen your face when you come back. It clings to you.

"It's what I'm good at," Will told him.

You want something more. Not to be chained by these rules.

"I can't, Hannibal. You know I can't."

You can. I will protect you. He crawled closer. *I will protect you no matter what.*

"Hannibal-"

I won't push. But know that I will protect you, Will.

"I know," Will said, feeling a sad smile cross his lips.

Will you do something for me?

"What?"

Meet me for lunch.

Will chuckled, tugging at his gloves to draw them over his hands. "You want to meet for lunch?"

Yes.

Will lifted his eyes, making eye contact with Hannibal once more. "How?"

I'll find you.

Will sighed. "All right." He knew better than to argue with Hannibal at this point, though part of him wondered how he would manage to put together a meal for them. "Do you want me to leave you a key or-"

Don't worry.

Will huffed but didn't say anything else. Soon, the two of them were leaving the house. Will climbed into his car with one last glance at Hannibal. Hannibal cocked his head, then pulled his teeth back in a grin, making Will chuckle slightly. The last thing he saw as he pulled out of the driveway was Hannibal watching him, his antlers a drastic contrast against the backdrop of Will's house.

It turned out that Will needed the invitation that Hannibal extended him as he left the crime scene. This one was different, years' worth of bodies piled up, culminating in the newest kill, a bloody body atop a pillar of death. Will could still hear the water crashing around him, could taste the scent of the ocean combined with the metallic smell of blood, all of which washed over Will with the rage of a storm that had yet to come.

Will white-knuckled his way from the crime scene, his hands wrapped so tight on the steering wheel, he was losing feeling in his fingers.

It was only when he glimpsed antlers along the side of the road that Will's jaw unclenched. He watched as Hannibal ran alongside his car, keeping pace for a while as they continued to near Quantico. Hannibal pointed ahead of him to a turn that led to a hiking area. Will obeyed, taking the exit when it came and following Hannibal as he guided their way. Soon, Will came to a secluded parking lot, empty in the cold. Hannibal waited for him to exit his car, a pile of food already set out on a table in front of him.

Will stood, leaving the car and venturing forward. Hannibal sat at the table, looking back and forth between him and the food, trying to assess Will's approval at the spread before him.

Will smiled and climbed over the bench at the other side of the table, groaning when he sat.

Their lunch was simpler than their breakfast, but Will still found himself impressed by what Hannibal had made. There was a pile of sandwiches in front of him, each with various combinations of meat and vegetables. Hannibal looked up at him, his hands hidden under the table.

Will smiled and shifted forward, relieved at Hannibal's presence.

Hannibal waited a moment as Will settled himself before lifting his hands into view. As he had done before, Hannibal offered him a flower. But this one seemed different than the rest. It was a pure white flower that almost looked fake. The petals seemed to bend back on themselves, creating waves between them and covering the inside of the flower. Will raised it to his nose, inhaling the sweet scent. He had to remember to look up the meanings of flowers later; it seemed Hannibal knew them and was constantly using them to communicate with him in languages Will had yet to learn.

Hannibal watched him closely, then smiled, almost shyly, when Will looked up at him. Will smiled back then ducked his head, his face feeling warm.

"Lunch looks great," He said, trying to distract himself from the warmth in his face and the fluttering in his chest.

I made it for you.

Will smiled again, reaching for a sandwich. "Thank you."

You're welcome.

Will ate in silence at first, his mind running around the crime scene and the flower lying on the table next to him.

You're quiet.

Will looked up and shrugged.

Talk to me.

Will sighed. "The crime scene I was at. It was...different."

Different?

"I can't explain it. It was a tower of bodies spanning years."

Sounds tasty.

Will didn't know why, but the single statement was enough to drive a laugh from his throat. Once he started, he found he couldn't stop. Across the table, Hannibal grinned, making Will laugh more as he thought about before when the sight of those fangs once made him afraid. Now, though, the sight of Hannibal smiling at him was normal, easy, comforting. Everything

about Hannibal was comforting. For such a creature as he was, and Will still didn't know what that was, he was less menacing with Will than he had initially thought.

Will's laughter died as he thought about Hannibal more, about how far they had come in only a month, and his stomach backflipped.

He cleared his throat, taking another bite of his sandwich as Hannibal cocked his head.

Is something wrong?

Will shook his head. "No. Nothing's wrong." He smiled, hoping it was enough to reassure Hannibal.

Soon, they finished their meal, and Will thanked him, glad for the break before he had to return to Quantico. He drove to Quantico with one hand on the wheel and the other turning the flower in his hand.

He spent the whole day staring at the flower, even as he wrote his report from the crime scene. When curiosity bested him, he looked up the meaning behind the flower, searching over through picture after picture until he found the one staring at him from his desk.

It was a carnation. A white carnation.

Will nearly choked when he found the meaning.

Pure love.

The thought ran around Will's mind for the rest of the day.

Pure love.

Pure love.

Pure love.

Will didn't stop thinking about it as he made dinner, finding Hannibal watching him in the same way he always did. He watched his movements, his face. He listened when Will spoke, followed him through his house even though it meant Hannibal had to crawl the entire time. Hannibal slept on his couch and crept closer every night. He made him meals and was content just to be near him. After his head injury, Hannibal took care of him and brought him flowers, something no one had ever done for him before.

Now, Will lay in bed, staring at the ceiling above him. He could hear the dogs breathing around him, but there was something more. Even as he looked elsewhere, he could still feel Hannibal across the room on the couch. He would wait until Will was asleep, then take the pillow, and blanket Will offered him and would move closer. By this point, he would be entirely at Will's bedside by morning.

"Hannibal," Will said before he even knew what he was doing. Hannibal reacted immediately, sitting up. Will could see the outline of his antlers in the moonlight. Will

swallowed thickly as he looked over at him.

What are you doing, Will? He thought to himself.

But what he said aloud was different.

"Do you want to sleep over here?" He paused. "In the bed, I mean."

I won't displace you.

Will's stomach backflipped.

"No. I mean-" He cut himself off. But he had started this, and he couldn't back out now. "I mean with me."

Chapter 11

Hannibal seemed to freeze at Will's request. Will could feel his white eyes boring into him from across the room. He didn't react beyond that at first, and Will wondered if he had overstepped. Or worse. Hannibal cocked his head, antlers moving to the side in the moonlight. Then he shifted, moving off the couch slowly. Will could see him wrap his blanket around his shoulders before he grabbed his pillow and began to crawl closer. He moved slowly like Will was a spooked animal and took pauses as he crossed the room, eyes always focused on Will. When he was closer, Will pulled back the blankets on the unused side of the bed, lamenting mentally at how small it was. Maybe he should invest in a bigger bed.

But a bigger bed would require more room, and Will never used the upstairs. Could Hannibal's antlers even fit up the stairs?

Hannibal crawled closer still, carefully navigating his way around the edge of Will's bed. It felt like an eternity before he was finally on the other side. First, he placed the pillow, gauging Will's reaction to the act. Then, when Will didn't protest, he climbed into the bed, his own blanket still clinging to his shoulders. It took him a moment to adjust himself, settling onto his back, half propped up to keep his antlers from banging against the wall.

Will could see when Hannibal turned toward him, looking for approval.

Will himself held his breath the whole time until Hannibal was finally in the bed next to him. When Hannibal turned to him, he could feel the breath as it left his lips, finally releasing the tension in Will's body following his question. Hannibal settled more into the bed, stretching his legs along the length of it.

"Are you comfortable? I can move the bed away from the wall if-"

I'm comfortable.

"Are you sure? You're not even lying down. Your antlers-"

Hannibal raised a hand, gently pressing it to the side of Will's face to silence him. It worked wonders as the words died immediately when Hannibal touched him.

I am quite comfortable, Will. You do not need to worry about me. Especially not after something like this.

"Something like this?" Will asked, breathless.

Yes.

"What do you mean?"

Hannibal shifted and then leaned closer, making it easier for their eyes to meet in the darkness.

Nests are... intimate.

"Nests?" Will asked before the realization dawned on him. "Oh, beds?"

In a way. In all the time I have known you, you have only slept here with one exception. It is your space. And entering it is personal.

"If you're uncomfortable, you don't have to stay," Will said quickly, suddenly self-conscious.

It is not my comfort I worry about.

"I'm-" Will began before Hannibal leaned forward, pressing his forehead against Will's.

Will's breath caught in his chest, and for a moment, he thought about how easy it would be to tilt his head and press their lips together, how easy it would be to kiss Hannibal.

His brain stuttered at the thoughts and began backtracking on itself, wondering why exactly he was thinking about kissing the creature next to him.

"Fine," He said eventually, the word falling from his lips in a strangely careless way. "Stay." He said after a moment, the word sounding just as breathless as he had before, but there was a command in it as well.

Hannibal pulled away and settled himself more, shoulders shifting against pillows to bury himself in them. Then he pulled his blanket around him more, looking at Will briefly. Will was still frozen in place; his head turned as it was when Hannibal pressed against him. Hannibal, however, wasn't frozen as he reached for the blankets covering Will and tugged them up more, tucking them around Will's shoulders.

Will finally relaxed again, settling into the blankets. However, he quickly found that lying on his back was uncomfortable. Briefly, he debated turning onto his side away from Hannibal, but that idea felt isolating for some reason. Rather than overthink it, Will turned onto his side facing Hannibal and closed his eyes.

He heard Hannibal suck in a breath, the first time he had ever heard him affected like that with something Will did, before he settled into the bed more. Will thought maybe he turned onto his side as soon he felt a cool hand reach for him and begin to stroke his curls, something he hadn't done since the day after Will's injury. Will settled himself, letting Hannibal continue to stroke his hair.

He fell asleep quicker that night than he could ever remember.

The morning, however, brought its own set of challenges for Will.

He didn't know how or when or why, but he had curled closer to Hannibal at some point during the night. He woke with his arm draped over his torso and their legs pressed together with one of Hannibal's hands still pressed against his cheek as though he had fallen asleep

while stroking Will's hair. Hannibal, surprisingly, had yet to wake up if his soft breathing was any indication. Will extracted himself from Hannibal's grasp, his face on fire and his stomach backflipping. He managed to wake the dogs without disturbing Hannibal, letting them out.

When he returned inside, dogs in tow, Hannibal was awake and gently tugging at the blankets of Will's bed as though he was making it.

Will couldn't bring himself to make eye contact, his stomach still backflipping and his heart pounding.

He nodded to Hannibal, then ventured into the bathroom, not even thinking about grabbing more clothes before he shut the door, aiming to take a cold shower to shock him out of whatever funk he was in.

For only the second time since they met, Will thought about the fact that Hannibal was always naked, his body out in the open for Will to see at all times. Did he think it weird that Will wore clothes? What did he even think about clothes in the first place? Hannibal never worried about changing clothes after bathing himself. Did he bathe himself? Hannibal never smelled, at least not enough that Will or the dogs noticed. Not even a natural scent. Was he masking it somehow?

Will stepped into the cold water and let out a litany of curses at the chill that sunk into his bones immediately. Eventually, he turned the facet, making the water warmer. Soon, the bathroom steamed, and Will's skin was on fire, having turned the water hotter than he normally did. The combination of the two temperatures, though, seemed to calm his anxious mind and body as he stepped out of the shower with his stomach finally calm.

That didn't last, though.

It was only as he looked at his nightclothes that he remembered he hadn't brought anything else in with him. He sighed, wrapping a towel around himself and shoving down the anxiety that rose within him. At least, he thought it was anxiety. Anxiety was the closest thing he could think of for the feelings he was having.

Will opened the door to find Hannibal on the other side, waiting for him.

He looked Will over once, eyes hovering over his chest and abdomen before he looked beyond him. He pointed at the shower, still dripping from Will's usage.

"The shower?" Will asked, turning back to Hannibal.

Is that how you bathe?

"Yeah," Will answered. "Do you-" He cut himself off, the question dying on his tongue. He had been about to ask Hannibal if he wanted to try it, but one look at the creature's antlers, and he knew he would never fit. But there was another reason he cut himself. Something about the question seemed so personal, and, despite all they had shared, Will found that he couldn't bring himself to ask it.

How do you use it?

Will sighed to himself and stepped aside to let Hannibal enter. In the cramped space of the bathroom, they were much closer to each other, and Will's heart began speeding again at the proximity. He moved toward the shower, pointing at the facet head before explaining how turning it on allowed him to wash. He added in the fact that the water could be at different temperatures, though he didn't know why he felt obligated to do so.

May I?

Will jumped at the question, turning back to Hannibal, who evaluated him closely.

"I don't think your antlers will fit in the shower," Will said. Hannibal looked dejected momentarily before Will continued. "But you could always take a bath."

At that, Hannibal cocked his head, looking toward the tub that surrounded the shower.

"I can start the water, and you can tell me what temperature you want; then, I'll plug it and let it fill, and you can climb in."

Hannibal nodded, stepping closer to the bathtub in interest. Will did as he said, leaning toward the tub. For a moment, he forgot he was wearing only a towel, and as he shifted, the towel moved with him, revealing more of his leg. Had he not caught it in time, he knew the towel would have fallen, and the idea of it doing so made Will feel the need to run from the bathroom. He stayed, though, warming up the water until Hannibal was comfortable. Then he let the tub fill, explaining the soap to Hannibal before turning off the water.

Will left the bathroom with the sight of Hannibal in the tub, his antlers extending above him and his hands casually patting the water like a child experiencing a bath for the first time.

He quickly ran to dress himself, tugging on the biggest sweater he had to keep it from fitting his form tightly. After a while, he heard the water begin to shift and the distinct sound of the tub draining before Hannibal appeared in the doorway.

He pointed at the towel Will had set aside. Will pointed to the other towel hanging in his bathroom, one he rarely used, and Hannibal dried himself off, carefully replacing the towel when he was done.

Will distracted himself by starting the coffee then pulling out ingredients for breakfast. It wouldn't be anything fancy today, less than the breakfast Hannibal had prepared before, but both he and Hannibal knew he would have to leave soon to teach.

He felt Hannibal before he saw him as the creature followed him into the kitchen, moving to watch Will as he always did in the mornings.

Will made himself and Hannibal breakfast, the two of them sitting at Will's tiny dining room table. Hannibal's antlers extended almost to the ceiling from his perch on the chair, and Will couldn't help but wonder if the ceiling in the kitchen was lower than the rest of the house.

Hannibal's antlers still had some room between them and the ceiling as long as he didn't stand, but the kitchen made him look bigger, like a god in their domain.

"Will."

Will jumped as Hannibal tugged him from his thoughts.

Are you all right?

"Yeah. Everything's fine." Will plastered a smile on his face as he spoke, even though he knew Hannibal could probably see right through him.

In truth, everything wasn't fine, but Will didn't know what the problem was. He couldn't put his finger on it, couldn't place why he was so different today than most days.

"What will you do today?" Will asked, trying to change the conversation.

I'm not sure. Hannibal answered.

Will chuckled to himself. If he knew anything about Hannibal, and he knew quite a lot already, it was that Hannibal had something planned. He wasn't telling Will what it was, which meant he wanted it to be a surprise. Will usually hated surprises, but they were never as weighted with Hannibal as with other people. Everything with Hannibal was easier.

Part of him wondered if that meant something. If the fact that Will could grow comfortable around what most people would see as a monster was an indicator of Will himself. Yet when he looked at Hannibal, who was kinder to him than most humans ever were, he found that he didn't need to know why or what it meant.

Once he finished his coffee and did the dishes, they bid each other goodbye before each set out on their separate ways.

Will went to Quantico to teach, and while he lectured, he spent most of the thing thinking about Hannibal. He thought about waking up in his arms in the morning, how nice it felt to fall asleep to him stroking his hair. He thought about the fact that for the first time in years, he didn't have a nightmare and how he hadn't been sweating when he woke up.

By the time he returned home, most of the day flying by without him really noticing it, the earlier feelings had calmed down. Now, all he wanted was to go home to his dogs and Hannibal, the only things in the world that understood him and accepted him for exactly who he was, darkness and all.

He arrived home to find Hannibal's newest surprise: a dinner and even more white carnations, these lining the edge of Will's bed.

That night, Will bid Hannibal back into his bed once again.

And then again the night after that.

And again and again, until it became so natural, Will wondered why he had ever let Hannibal sleep anywhere else.

Chapter 12

Will woke to the sound of his phone ringing. He groaned, stretching and reaching for it before ending the call and curling back into bed. The phone rang again, and Will groaned, tugging the blankets around him more. Behind him, Hannibal shifted, the arm draped around Will's waist holding tighter. The phone rang a third time, and Will reached for it once again, dragging it off the bedside table and removing the charger before pressing it against his ear.

"Graham," He grunted, eyes still closed.

Behind him, Hannibal shifted closer, and Will knew well enough by now to tilt his head, letting Hannibal lean into his neck and inhale.

On the phone, Jack told him about a new case involving a body found by a trucker. The body was apparently torn apart, pieces of it left on top of the cab of a long haul truck. Will grunted in response, forcing his eyes open. Jack continued, telling him where the crime scene was and to meet him there immediately, leaving no room for argument on Will's side. Will didn't even bother saying goodbye, hanging up the phone before Jack could say anything else.

Hannibal shifted again, his grip on Will tightening as Will placed his phone back on his bedside table.

"Will," Hannibal said, tugging at Will.

Will groaned and rolled over, facing Hannibal. Hannibal was on his side; his head tilted slightly to accommodate his antlers. He pulled Will closer as though he was trying to keep Will in the bed with him. Will stretched, his body shifting along the length of Hannibal's before he realized what he was doing.

"Crime scene," Will grumbled, turning onto his back. Hannibal reluctantly withdrew his arm to let Will stretch more before pushing himself out of bed.

Behind him, Hannibal also sat up, pulling himself up the bed without leaving it. Will could hear the bed shifting, but the noise itself wasn't indicative of him standing. Will went to the bathroom, splashing cold water on his face to wake himself up more. Then he ventured into the kitchen to put the coffee on before rummaging around for clothing, still half asleep. Hannibal watched him the whole time, white eyes following his every movement.

Will tugged on clothes, uncaring for the brief moment part of him were exposed. Hannibal had seen bits and pieces of him here and there, and Will knew him well enough to know that Hannibal would look away when Will changed. Will hoped the reason was to give him privacy and not because of something else, but he tried not to overthink it. Sometimes his thoughts ran away from him, and he began to overthink everything when it came to Hannibal. Of all the people Will could read, Hannibal was the hardest. Maybe it was because he wasn't human, or maybe it was because Hannibal was better than most at guarding himself.

Will returned to the kitchen, pouring himself some coffee. At this point, Hannibal left the bed and followed him, pointing to the fridge to indicate he wouldn't abide Will not eating breakfast. Will found something simple, making some eggs and reheating sausage he had already made the day before. Hannibal seemed to deem the breakfast good enough because he didn't protest the simplicity of it. Will ate while leaning half against the counter, every bite followed quickly by a sip of coffee.

Hannibal watched him the whole time, eyes never focused anywhere but on Will.

Even without irises, Will always knew when Hannibal was looking at him. He could feel the weight of his gaze at all times, even if he was out and about and Hannibal had followed him, hiding somewhere out of view.

Will placed his cup and plate in the sink before pouring the rest of his coffee into a travel mug.

Hannibal mimicked him before crawling closer, invading Will's space.

Will smiled when Hannibal neared him for the first time that morning, strangely comforted as he always was by Hannibal's presence. Hannibal smiled in return, reaching to drag the backs of his knuckles along Will's cheek.

Hannibal leaned forward, and Will met him halfway, their foreheads touching. Will sighed into the feeling, finding that he wanted to stay right there with Hannibal more than anything.

Will sighed for a different reason when he pulled back, feeling Hannibal's gaze follow him.

"I should get going," Will said.

You don't seem like you want to.

Will shrugged.

This isn't the first time it's happened.

"I know," Will answered softly.

Hannibal was right. Recently, dragging himself to crime scenes had been tedious. He didn't know why, but more and more, he was finding that he didn't feel the same need to be around crime scenes as he did before. He didn't need the same darkness by proxy, the feeling of diving into the darkness of others, even if they took a piece of him with them too. Now, though, Will felt more and more like crime scenes didn't provide what they used to, didn't have the same minute satisfaction they once provided. It was true that the scenes often took more than they gave, emblazing themselves on Will's psyche, branding him in such a way that he could never truly escape.

Sometimes, Will found himself mimicking the killers, their quirks becoming his own. It was his empathy, he knew, but it begged the question if he wasn't mimicking killers, then who was he empathizing with now? If his darkness was no longer satisfied with the darkness left

behind by others, then what satisfied it? Why were things so much different now than they had been before?

Will thought he knew at least one answer or at least a potential cause. But for some reason, he couldn't fully accept it yet.

"It's in the middle of nowhere. The crime scene." He looked over at Hannibal. "You can come if you want. See what I do."

I've seen. For some reason, the words felt heavier than how they were initially meant. *But I would like to see more.*

Will smiled at that. "I'm sure you could use the stretch too."

Hannibal smirked.

It was ill-advised to try and stick Hannibal in Will's car, though the idea of Hannibal's antlers sticking through the roof and hanging out in the morning air while driving 60mph down the interstate did amuse him. The thought amused Hannibal too when Will told him.

However, they both knew that Hannibal often enjoyed running alongside Will's car when he could, the two of them often keeping pace with one another when no one else was around. Hannibal could run fast enough to keep up with him, and Will had seen a smile on his face more than once when they continued to keep pace with each other.

Hannibal followed him from the house after they let the dogs out and back in. Will locked the door while Hannibal stretched, standing to his full height. Will had thought more than once about renovating his house to cut off part of the second floor to give Hannibal more room, but the renovation would make it hard to sleep, and Hannibal never once complained about having to crouch.

Will drove to the crime scene while sipping his coffee and catching glimpses of Hannibal out his window as he followed the directions to the crime scene.

The scene itself was at a rest stop. Will already knew the trucker had probably stopped there for coffee. Rigorous routes and insane schedules often meant that they needed to stay awake for long hours rather than resting. Late at night in a relatively unpopulated rest stop was the perfect time for murder. Oftentimes too, truck stops didn't have cameras, and even if they did, those cameras rarely ever pointed at the parking lot. Will had seen more than his fair share of trysts in rest stop parking lots while he was a cop.

When he reached the crime scene, everyone else was just setting up. Zeller was already climbing on top of the white cab, now spattered in red, especially down the windshield. Price was setting up something else that Will couldn't see while Beverly took pictures of the crime scene. Jack stood a little further back from everyone else, but Will was more surprised to see Alana, who stood next to him.

He parked, carefully evaluating the trees for a glimpse of Hannibal. It wasn't quite yet winter, but it was one of the colder days. The trees were barren between the changing seasons and

the cooler weather, making it harder for Hannibal to hide. He still managed, though, as Will only barely caught a glimpse of antlers before he vanished.

He walked toward the crime scene, burying his hands in his pockets. His breath swirled in the air in front of him as he neared, catching glimpses of the scene before anyone else knew he was there.

Will stopped when he was beside Alana and Jack, looking up at the crime scene. He took a deep breath, not even acknowledging the various greetings thrown his way as he looked at the piece of bone Zeller raised to take a better picture.

Will could see what happened from the moment he stopped. He could see the blood as it spilled, the heat of it warming the cold metal under it. He could almost taste it on his tongue, the fresh blood dancing across his tastebuds. He could see every bone as it broke and every tear in soft flesh.

"An animal, maybe?"

Will glanced to the trees, his eyes automatically finding Hannibal. Hannibal looked between him, and the newest bone Zeller was holding and shook his head once.

Will barely acknowledged, dropping his head just barely but enough that Hannibal would notice. Then he looked back, his eyes following the shattering of the bone. It was an animal, he knew this, but it was the human kind.

"Mechanical, most likely." That was all he said, barely bothering to explain why he came to that theory.

As the crime scene was documented more and more, Jack moved away, listening to whatever Price had to tell him while Beverly drifted nearer to Will, who still stood with Alana at his shoulder.

"You seem... different," Alana told him.

"Different?"

Will hadn't seen Alana since the day she visited him at his house. Since then, he had been far too focused on Hannibal to even bother seeking her out, something he would have done before. But now, as he had suspected previously, he didn't feel the same way toward her. When he thought about it more, he wondered if the reason he had gravitated toward her in the first place was because of her stability. Perhaps some part of him thought that he could use her as a balance, a way to hold himself to the world without becoming too lost in the darkness he craved.

Now, though, she was just a colleague to him. Someone friendly, yes. A friend even. But that was the extent of his feelings.

Will knew, though, what Alana meant when she used the word 'different.' She meant stable, sane, less like the Will Graham she had refused even when he had only barely begun making

romantic advances.

"It's true," Beverly said, never one to pull punches like the rest. It was one of the reasons Will liked her more than most. He never had to try to enter her mind to see what she was thinking; in fact, he rarely ever had to let his empathy out with her at all. She was blunt, honest, and rarely ever withheld the thoughts in her head. Of the humans in Will's life, she was the easiest to be around. Never loud or complicated, but also never hidden to the extent it seemed like she was hiding something. "You're less weird at crime scenes." She continued, taking a picture of some blood drops to Will's left.

"I thought you said I was always weird."

"Oh, you still are," Beverly answered with a grin. "It's a great strategy. That way, no one would ever know if anything was wrong."

Will looked at her in response, and she grinned again before finding something else that needed her attention.

All the while, Alana had been staring at him, her wheels turning and thoughts running rampant.

"Did you finally decide to see a psychiatrist?" She asked, keeping her voice low. Alana had argued early on when Jack first recruited Will for his team that Will needed someone to protect his headspace. A psychiatrist or psychologist he could go to so he wouldn't drown in the darkness offered to him.

"No," Will answered.

Alana evaluated him closer at that, turning more as if she could see him better when she was fully facing him.

"Then what is it?"

Will shrugged and stared at the bloody mess in front of him, watching as Zeller tried to navigate around the narrow roof of the truck cab.

"Will," Alana began. But Will wasn't exactly sure he wanted to hear whatever diatribe she would give him.

In hindsight, he knew that they wouldn’t have worked out with each other. She would have spent their whole relationship studying him, and he would have spent it resenting her. Her professional curiosity and Will's darkness would clash. He could see no way it would have ended well.

But maybe something else could work out better.

Will had told Hannibal once that people looked for the person for them and responded that people didn't like him when he tried to look. But now, he wondered if that was different.

"I met someone," He said, cutting off whatever Alana was going to say next.

"WHAT?" She nearly yelled, surprised enough that it forced the reaction from her.

Will turned, avoiding the four sets of eyes that had fallen on the following Alana's exclamation.

"What's she like?" Alana asked, calming herself down enough that she came across the same way she would if she were professionally curious rather than personally.

"*He* is different," Will said before walking away, leaving Alana to comprehend what he had just told her.

The next day, Will ventured to museums within range of the crime scene. Earlier that morning, Price and Zeller confirmed Will's theory, stating that the bite marks left on the bones were likely made by animals that first no longer existed, and second, didn't have the jaw strength to cause the shattering that was seen on the bones. Will spent the next hour following their confirmation looking for museums that displayed the skulls of the species Price and Zeller mentioned.

He managed to narrow it down to two, though the first museum didn't seem to yield any results.

The second, however, proved more informative.

At the second museum, Will met a man named Randall Tier, who mainly worked with cleaning and maintenance of all the skeletons within the museum. From the moment the two of them were in the same place, Will could see the darkness that lingered behind his eyes. There was something about it, something different enough, that had Will pushing just a little more than he usually would have. But he knew there was something there, something worth looking into, even if Tier wasn't the killer he was looking for.

He thought about Tier and the earlier revelations by Price and Zeller on the drive back to Quantico, his mind running in circles.

The only reprieve was the glimpse of Hannibal that Will managed to see on his drive back.

Will reached Quantico quicker than he would have liked, but he was amused to see Hannibal somehow on the rooftop when he arrived. He remembered the first time he had seen him there and how it had seemed dangerous and daunting at the time. Now, it was more of a relief than anything else to see the shadow of antlers that gave away Hannibal's presence.

Will nodded to him briefly before stepping into the building.

He spent the rest of the day researching Randall Tier to find that he had received a degree in engineering before eventually returning to school to earn a degree in anthropology. The anthropology degree was likely what had given him access to the skull he used — some type of bear, Will had stopped listening by that point — and the engineering degree gave him knowledge of how to use it.

By the end of the day, Will had convinced himself, at least, that Tier was responsible for the murder.

But there was no evidence, nothing beyond his own intuition and empathy that would convince anyone else. He would need something more, something specific. Something left at a crime scene to implicate him. A drop of blood, a fingerprint, something. No one would believe him as it was, that he knew because he could see the darkness within him just as easily as he could see it in himself when he looked in the mirror.

Thankfully, he didn't have to worry about someone not believing him for too long.

Hannibal was waiting when he arrived home, a new flower in hand and an unwavering belief in what Will had to say.

Will had talked to him more than once about a crime scene, about a killer that he could sense when no one else could. Hannibal proved to be surprisingly helpful, even if it was just to let him bounce ideas off of him to arrange his own thoughts.

Will had sensed for a while now that Hannibal had no qualms about killing humans. In fact, he couldn't help but think there was more to the story about his sister. Hannibal had vaguely referred to who the responsible parties were, but Will couldn't help but think that he wasn't talking about males of his own species. The men who killed her were human men, men that Hannibal likely tore apart brutally.

But when it came to Will, he was always careful and kind and gentle.

Will had thought he hated gentleness, but it turned out he had never experienced gentleness until Hannibal. The gentleness of others was often thinly veiled pity, but not with Hannibal.

By the time they were in bed, Will's mind was running for a different reason. The same reason that had occupied him for days now, even before he first let Hannibal into his bed. It was Hannibal himself, of course, that occupied his thoughts. Hannibal's actions, the things he said, the things he did.

Hannibal had just reached for him, the backs of his knuckles barely brushing over Will's cheek, when they heard glass shattering followed by a bone-chilling cold.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

This is a Hannibal fic. Cannibalism had to come in at some point.

Hannibal reacted before Will even fully comprehended what had happened. In the few seconds following the shattering of the window, Hannibal was up the blankets on the bed thrown to the side. Will glanced around Hannibal, his body reacting in slow motion compared to the movements of Hannibal in front of him. Hannibal's body was between his and their intruder. His body was curled slightly, tensed, and his antlers lowered. Will barely managed to throw the blankets off himself when Hannibal lunged, attacking before their intruder could.

Their intruder tried to duck, but Hannibal was faster, slamming him against the sliver of wall next to the desk. Will pushed himself upright, unable to do more than watch as Hannibal snarled and snapped, attacking their intruder.

Around them, the dogs howled and barked, jaws snapping toward the intruder, though they didn't lunge for whoever it was.

The intruder was dressed in a mechanical suit, the jaws made of bone repeatedly snapped at Hannibal, aiming to catch an artery or soft spot. Hannibal, however, was far too fast and managed to move before their intruder could do anything. Hannibal launched himself against the intruder, claws tearing and teeth gnashing. Hannibal tore through the soft leather of the suit, claws digging into even more delicate flesh.

Will watched with amazement at how Hannibal moved. Every motion was fluid, planned, as though he knew his opponents move before even they did. His body stayed purposefully between Will and their intruder, twisting the other away and time he even so much as moved close enough to Will.

Will could see every flex of Hannibal's body, the muscles that rolled under his skin, the darkness that unleashed itself in full force and aimed solely at their intruder. Hannibal's antlers dug into the soft underbelly he found, goring him.

Blood splattered against the walls as Will heard their intruder suck in a wet breath. More blood slapped against the floor as it fell, drops pooling and running together. The mask of the suit flew off, revealed the battered and bloodied face of its owner.

Randall Tier.

Hannibal slashed again, claws scraping across his chest, tearing and slashing. Tier sucked in another wet breath as he fell, blood slipping past his lips before his head collided with the

floor. His eyes searched out Will, not even looking for Will in particular, but for someone, anyone, who could save him. Save him from the creature that suddenly befell him, the creature that tore him apart, snarling and snapping. The creature that still prowled between him and Will, body covered in blood and muscles flexing wildly.

When Hannibal seemed to deem Tier less of a threat, he moved toward the window so quickly; he blurred in front of Will's eyes for a moment.

He snarled more, eyes focused out the broken window without caring one bit about the glass under his hooves. He stood to his full height, antlers scraping along the ceiling. Will stared at him, mostly in awe.

Because, God, he was beautiful.

Hannibal's muscles continued to flex, chest heaving. Will hadn't even realized how much healthier he had looked recently, his ribs no longer as easily defined against his skin. Will couldn't see the vertebrae of his spin, but he could see the muscles of his back as his arms twitched, forcing his skin to flex over the sinew. Blood ran along his oily black skin, nearly the same color as it in the moonlight.

On the floor, Tier tried to crawl away, his breathing becoming heavier along the way. Will could hear the blood filling his lungs, and honestly, he didn't care one bit. He didn't care about the blood he stepped on or the body he stepped over. He didn't care about Tier's silent pleading, falling on deaf ears as Will turned his back. He didn't care about the glass underfoot as he stepped forward toward the beautiful beast standing guard at the window.

He reached for Hannibal, one hand pressing against the muscles of his arm, feeling the blood that immediately soaked his skin. But under it was Hannibal, whose skin was strangely soft. Had he always been that soft? Hannibal didn't even look at him as he neared, eyes still focused out the window.

Will stepped closer, wary of the predator who had just left a body on Will's floor. Hannibal didn't even kill him. He was left suffering. Left to die. Will could hear the wetness of his breath even now as he stood across the room. He wasn't wary because he thought that Hannibal might hurt him, but wary because Hannibal's darkness had been on display. For the first time, he showed his violence, the darkness within him. He had let Will see him fully, and Will knew there was a chance Hannibal thought he would reject him.

Had he always been his beautiful?

Will's hand traveled up his arm, uncaring of the blood his fingers slipped through as he did.

Hannibal reached for him, his arm carefully wrapping around Will's body to drag him closer. He still didn't look at him, staring out the window and into the night. Will caught a glimpse of Hannibal's eyes as he neared. They weren't white anymore, but jet black and menacing. Hannibal pulled Will closer until he was tucked completely into Hannibal's side.

Will could still see the blood on his teeth, feel it drip from his antlers onto Will's cheek, and yet it didn't bother Will one bit. He didn't even care that his free hand slipped through more

blood as he touched Hannibal's cheek, turning his head gently so their eyes could meet.

Hannibal turned, and as he did, his eyes changed. The moment they met Will's, the black seemed to bleed out of them, leaving behind the familiar white eyes that Will was used to. The same color as the carnations he had given Will time and time again.

Hannibal turned toward him, his body angling away from the window and toward Will, holding him closer.

Across the room, Will heard as Randall Tier took in his last breath, the sound falling on ears who barely even cared he was there.

He didn't even need to look to know what Hannibal would do next. He was already tilting his head upward as Hannibal's head bent, their foreheads meeting in the middle.

God, he could taste the blood on his tongue from here. Was Hannibal a god? Some ancient forest god who happened to come across Will one day? Who decided that he would protect Will, even in the face of an intruder who likely could have done just as much damage to him.

Will's head tilted slightly before he even knew what he was doing, but Hannibal drew away.

Will came back to himself, his face feeling about a million degrees and his heart racing in his chest. Had he just been about to-

He stopped the thoughts in their tracks as he watched Hannibal move across the room, no longer standing but crouching as he often did. He crawled toward Tier's body, gently shooing away the dogs.

Will turned to look at the shattered window and the glass that littered the ground. He would need to clean this up. And how the hell would they deal with Tier's body? Maybe he could call Jack and say it was self-defense. That he had interviewed Tier earlier in the day, and now Tier came for him because he saw him as a threat. The head of the suit, cave bear jaws included, would match the bite marks found on the victim's body, and Will knew the suit itself would have enough power in it to cause the shattering Will had seen on the limbs. But how would Will explain the slash marks across his body? The slash marks left by Hannibal's claws, the bite marks from his teeth. How could he protect Hannibal if he turned in the body? Hannibal-

Who was currently digging in Tier's chest.

Will stepped closer, wary of the glass underfoot as he neared Hannibal. Hannibal continued digging, tearing through flesh and moving bone aside as though it was nothing. Will sat on the edge of his bed, eyes following Hannibal's movements as more blood dripped onto the floor.

As Will watched, Hannibal seemed to find what he was looking for, his claws searing flesh. When he withdrew, Will could only see the blood dripping from whatever was in his hands. Hannibal turned toward him, crawling closer. He reached for Will's hands, pulling one up then the other before placing the organ he removed from Tier's body.

His heart.

Will looked between the heart and Hannibal, a question on his face. Hannibal didn't speak, didn't do anything beyond guiding Will's hands once more, raising them until they were close to Will's face.

Hannibal shifted closer, crawling into Will's space and drawing himself upward until they were so close, Will could once again taste the blood that still lingered on Hannibal's tongue.

Hannibal leaned forward, his mouth nearing Will's hands.

It was then that Will understood. He knew what Hannibal wanted, what he was offering. But more importantly, he knew why.

Will leaned forward as Hannibal did and bit.

It took an eternity it felt like to clean up the mess left behind by Tier's attack.

Together, he and Hannibal took apart the body, storing it in Will's shed until they could dispose of it further. Hannibal dragged Tier's suit into the shed, too, once they finished with him. Will wondered about Hannibal's sense of humor as Hannibal seemed to take one look at the lines hanging from the ceiling and quickly attached the suit to them. Will had left the lines there so he could use them to lower his boat's engine into it when he was finished with it. Hannibal looked at his handy work before turning to Will, amusement evident in his eyes. Will looked up at the suit, hanging limply without a person to bring it to life.

He smiled, not because of the suit and where it was, but because Hannibal put it there, a display for Will to see every time he walked into the shed.

From there, the two of them ventured back toward Will's house. Before they went in, Will grabbed some spare boards he had near his shed. He would have to go shopping to replace the window, and it would take an hour or two to actually replace it. Maybe he would tell Jack that someone tried to break in last night, and he had to secure his house. Assuming Jack tried to call him to a crime scene anyway.

But there would be no more Randall Tier crime scenes. The one was all the FBI would ever find. One murder and the body left behind from it. He wouldn't be a spree killer or serial killer. Tier would be a one-off, a random killer who had only one known victim and would soon disappear following whatever minute interest was briefly given to him. His legacy would fade, there would be nothing left to him. At least not in the world. He died as he would have liked, in a skin he preferred. Will understood that now why Tier did what he did. He could see him, in his death, and the life that never really seemed to belong to him.

But his death would mean more to a person he barely knew and a creature who hardly even cared that he lived.

Hannibal watched him closely as he boarded up the window, sealing it as best he could for the night.

Then, they went back into the house.

The part that took the longest was cleaning the blood off the floor. The dogs watched from their beds, tails thumping but otherwise, they were of no help. Hannibal, however, was much more helpful, cleaning up the blood drops left on walls and the floor while Will himself cleaned the mess left behind where Tier died.

It was well into the night by the time they were done cleaning up the blood. Will's shoulders ached from scrubbing, and his hands cramped slightly when he curled his fingers, but none of that meant anything when he looked at Hannibal, who had stood between him and a killer and protected him.

Hannibal *protected* him.

And the evidence of Hannibal's protection still littered his skin.

Will beckoned Hannibal forward, dragging him into the bathroom. It was a slow process, cleaning the blood off Hannibal. He knew Hannibal could have done it himself, but there was something about cleaning the blood off himself that made Will feel like he was doing something in return. Something that would never add up to Hannibal protecting him, but it would be enough to show that he was grateful for what Hannibal had done.

Hannibal's eyes never left him, watching him closely with every movement Will made.

Will was careful, gentle. As gentle as he would be if he were cleaning his dogs. He took time to make sure that every bit of blood was down the drain before he let Hannibal dry off while he dumped bleach into the tub behind them, hoping to remove any residue that was left over.

Eventually, Hannibal drew Will into the bed, and Will went, knowing that if there were anything left to do, it would need to be done in the morning. Because now, all that mattered was Hannibal, who tucked Will against him once more, as if he could physically shield him from the world.

"Hannibal," Will whispered, tilting his head back to see him more. His creature, his monster, his Hannibal, tucked safely into his arms.

"Will," Hannibal said in return with the same softness in his voice Will realized he reserved only for him.

Hannibal leaned forward, their foreheads pressing together. Will sighed into feeling, shifting against Hannibal to burrow closer. Hannibal reached for him, his arm wrapping around Will's waist. Will's hand trailed up Hannibal's arm as he had done early, this time just to feel the softness of his skin rather than the blood that drenched it. He continued upward, his hand trailing over Hannibal's shoulder.

Hannibal tensed under his wandering hand but never once pulled away. In fact, he moved closer, their legs brushing under the blankets. Hannibal pulled those same blankets up around them as if trying to cocoon them together, away from the world.

Will's hand continued to trail upward, feeling Hannibal's jaw flex under his hand as he shifted, their noses brushing.

Will sucked in a breath.

God, Hannibal was so close. Beautiful, brutal Hannibal. His protector. His monster.

Before he knew what he was doing, Will tilted his head more, pressing his lips to Hannibal's.

Chapter 14

Hannibal didn't react to Will's kiss, and after a moment, Will pulled away. Hannibal didn't let him go, though, holding him tightly as his eyes found Will's in the darkness.

"I-" Will began, wondering how exactly he could explain himself. Was Hannibal mad at him? Did he even kiss? Was that a thing his species did?

What was that?

"A kiss?" The words came out more like a question that Will would have liked, doubt filtering into his words. Hannibal shifted closer, pressing back into the space Will had opened between them.

Why?

"Why did I do it?" Will asked, hoping that Hannibal wasn't asking that. That he would correct him, and it would turn out he was asking why about something else.

Yes.

Will sighed to himself, tearing his gaze away from Hannibal. Maybe he had overstepped. So many times, he thought he did so already, and yet Hannibal never seemed to question anything he did. Until now. This was the one thing that Hannibal ever questioned him on, really. He had asked question after question before about the names of objects or why Will did something that didn't hold the same weight as this. As a kiss. Maybe Hannibal didn't feel that way about him. Maybe the 'pure love' he referenced with his flowers was different.

Or maybe Will was running around his own mind trying to come up with answers on his own to a two-sided conversation.

"I-" He began before cutting himself off again.

Is it... intimate?

"Yes. In a way." Will continued to look anywhere but at Hannibal. How could he explain this? "It's something done between people who are important to each other."

Like friends? Family?

Will shrugged. "Sometimes, but not like that."

So that was different?

Will nodded.

Will you do it again?

"Do you want me to?" Will asked, raising his head slightly, risking a glimpse at Hannibal. His face was taut, and Will could feel just how focused he was on him. He had invaded Will's space once again, bringing them as close to each other as they were before Will kissed him. Hannibal leaned forward again, his forehead touching Will's.

Yes.

Will tilted his head again, pressing his lips to Hannibal's once more. Hannibal mimicked him, his lips molding to Will's to return the kiss. Will couldn't help but reach for him once again, his hand searching out Hannibal's cheek, fingers brushing over his cheekbone. Hannibal pressed closer, his grip tightening on Will's waist. Will heard his antlers scrape against the wall as his head tilted more, pressing closer and closer to Will. Will deepened their kiss, and Hannibal mimicked him again, catching on quickly to the act. Hannibal tugged Will closer still, somehow pressing them together even more. One of his hands slid between Will's body and the bed, using that arm to hold Will close while his other hand moved to Will's face, the backs of his knuckles pressing against Will's cheek.

Will shifted forward, leaning more of his weight against Hannibal's steady frame, feeling everywhere they touched. He could feel Hannibal's chest as it rose and fell with each breath; he could feel his heart in his chest, each beat coming faster and faster. He could feel the muscles of his legs where their legs brushed together. Any closer and Will would be plastered against Hannibal fully.

He wondered if that was a good idea. If pressing closer and pushing against Hannibal entirely would cause problems or if Hannibal wouldn't mind.

Hannibal's fingers curled in Will's hair, claws gently scraping against Will's scalp. It wasn't painful, but it was just enough of a reminder of how they had found their way here in the first place. He thought about the slashes on Tier's chest and how Hannibal had never even tried to hurt him that way.

Will swiped his tongue along the seam of Hannibal's lips, causing him to part them. He thought he would be met with fangs, but Hannibal caught on quickly, and suddenly all Will could taste was the lingering remnants of blood and something else under it.

Will's fingers dug into Hannibal's neck, his grip tightening without him realizing it, a need to have Hannibal closer manifesting itself without his permission. Hannibal didn't seem to mind, far too focused on kissing him than Will's grip.

Hannibal's lips pulled away from him, leaving Will bereft for a moment before he shifted. Will could feel the heat of his breath as he moved, his lips brushing over Will's cheek before he buried his face in Will's neck, inhaling.

Will's hand automatically came to the back of Hannibal's head as he tilted his own, not even realizing what he was doing until he had done it.

Hannibal buried himself closer, seemingly intrigued by the scent he found. Will's body arched slightly, desperate to tug Hannibal closer when he realized the reason why Hannibal was suddenly so intrigued.

Arousal pooled in Will's belly, heating him to the core and causing his body to react already. He could feel himself beginning to harden, the proximity to Hannibal not doing anything to lessen it.

Will cleared his throat, trying to shove his arousal down as he lessened his grip on Hannibal, no longer holding him as tightly. Hannibal pulled away from his neck, pressing his forehead to Will's once again.

That was- He paused. *Nice.*

Will let out a breathy chuckle, trying to focus anywhere but on Hannibal again, though this time for a different reason.

Can I kiss you again?

Will swallowed thickly, unable to look anywhere but at Hannibal now. He nodded, trying again to fight down his arousal. He wouldn't risk his arousal ruining this or making Hannibal uncomfortable. Hannibal leaned forward again, capturing Will's lips once more. Will couldn't help but grip Hannibal again. Hannibal tugged him closer, wrapping Will in his arms and holding him as though he was determined to never let go again.

When they broke apart, both were breathing heavily. Hannibal readjusted them, moving Will until he was tucked under Hannibal's chin. Will let himself be moved until he was resting on Hannibal's chest, the two of them gripping each other. Something about their positions felt even more intimate than the kissing, and Will had to fight down another spark of arousal. Hannibal stroked his back, his claws raising goosebumps in Will's flesh where they gently trailed over him.

"Will."

"Hmm?"

I'd like to show you something tomorrow. Will you let me?

Will nodded slowly, feeling half asleep as he lay on Hannibal's chest. His arousal died down, replaced by something even warmer and gentler.

And Hannibal, beautiful, brilliant Hannibal, held him, letting him bathe in that feeling as he drifted off to sleep.

He thought Hannibal said something else, but he was too far into sleep to hear it fully.

The next day, Will spent the morning replacing the window Tier had shattered the night before. Hannibal stayed with him the whole time, running alongside his car as Will drove to buy a new window, then staying at his side as he replaced it. The only time Hannibal left him was to make their lunch, putting together another pile of sandwiches as he had done before. Will washed off his hands as Hannibal wrapped them, placing them on the counter in front of them.

Do you have something to put these in?

"Like what?" Will asked, drying his hands.

Something you don't need to hold on to.

Will nodded and went upstairs, dragging a rarely used backpack out of one of the closets. It was a hiking backpack meant to hold food and a first aid kit with an attached bladder to hold water while hiking. Will ventured back downstairs, feeling Hannibal's eyes before he saw them. Hannibal nodded in approval before reaching for the food on the counter, holding it until Will could open the backpack and then depositing it inside. Will filled up the bladder too, hoping it held enough water for both of them just in case.

Hannibal had been secretive all day about what it was that he wanted to show Will, only telling him that he wouldn't need his car to drive there. Will wondered why he needed something to carry their lunch in that wouldn't require his hands to hold, but he knew Hannibal would clue him in eventually. Will let the dogs out again while Hannibal filled up their water dishes. Will could hear the water running inside, and the sound of it made him smile.

The dogs sniffed the ground outside the window, likely smelling either the remnants of putty Will used to seal the window in place or Tier from the night before. Either way, the scent soon lost its appeal to them as they were running in the cool air.

The night between Tier's attack and the morning had brought snow with it. The day itself was cool enough that the snow didn't melt, leaving a chill in Will's bones. Not that he had noticed it during the night. He barely noticed as he replaced the window either, the activity warming him enough that the weather wasn't a bother.

He made certain to grab his jacket, though, as he reentered the house to settle the dogs. Hannibal brought the backpack to him, and Will slid it on over his coat before they left the house.

Will locked the door then turned to look at Hannibal, who was stretching in the afternoon sun. Will couldn't help but smile at the sight before Hannibal relaxed again, turning toward him. He stretched out a hand, offering it to Will and reeling him in when Will took it. The backs of his knuckles brushed along Will's cheek before he bent slightly, first pressing his forehead against Will's then tilting his head so their lips could brush.

Will couldn't help but feel surprised at Hannibal instigating the kiss, but he didn't protest as he kissed him back.

Are you ready?

Will nodded, and Hannibal stepped back. Between blinks, he shifted, and suddenly Will was staring at the deer form he hadn't seen since they first met. This was the first time, though, he saw the form up close, and the distance didn't do Hannibal justice. The dark feathers on his hide seemed to shine in the sunlight, casting sparkles on the snow. Will stepped forward in

awe, his hand reaching for Hannibal. Hannibal's nose budded into his hand, encouraging him. He was soft in this form, too, as Will's hand stroked over his muzzle and head.

Hannibal stepped closer, his face burying in Will's chest. Will could feel him snort against him while he continued lower, petting the soft feathers on Hannibal's neck.

Beautiful. He was beautiful.

Will lowered his head, his eyes meeting Hannibal's. Hannibal's eyes were different in this form, no longer white. His eyes had irises and were amber in color, shining in the sun.

Hannibal bucked his head, jolting Will from the trance he was in as he stared at the beautiful creature in front of him.

Hannibal lowered himself, one leg at a time bending until he was pressed against the ground.

Climb on.

"Are you sure?" Will asked, looking over Hannibal in front of him.

Yes.

Will nodded and stepped forward, understanding now why Hannibal wanted him to have the backpack.

He moved forward, carefully lifting one leg until he was straddling Hannibal's back. Hannibal stood before he could lower himself, raising them both off the ground. Will lost his balance for a second, falling forward until his face was against Hannibal's neck.

Stay there and hold on.

Will swallowed thickly and reached forward, his arms wrapping around Hannibal's neck.

Don't let go.

"I won't," Will promised.

Hannibal started slowly, first walking then trotting. Once Will grew used to that, though, he began to speed up, and suddenly they were flying. Will could feel the cool air whipping through his air as they launched forward, Hannibal hurtling them to an unknown destination.

Chapter 15

It turned out Hannibal had held back all those times he ran alongside Will's car. Will felt like he was strapped to a rocket flying forward too fast for his brain to comprehend. Everything around him was a blur of brown and green when he dared to open his eyes to look. It wasn't that he was motion sick, though, he could certainly understand how someone could be, but every time he opened his eyes, the draft from the speed they were moving at instantly dried his eyes out, forcing him to close them. He clung to Hannibal, barely even feeling each step with how fast they were moving. He wasn't even sure if Hannibal touched the ground.

Hannibal sped forward fast enough that Will wondered if they were even still in Virginia, or even the U.S., anymore.

Will wondered if he had left his stomach somewhere back in Wolf Trap by the time they slowed. He didn't recognize anything around him, though it became evident immediately that he was on top of a mountain. Will could see the rolling peaks off to his left and right and the slope below them that Hannibal had climbed with ease. Hannibal moved forward slowly enough now that Will could sit upright. He still had a grip on some of Hannibal's feathers, not holding them tight enough to tear them, but enough that it provided some sort of balance while Will looked around. The trees were different here, evergreens rather than seasonal trees. Will could see grey rock in the peaks around, though the rocks seemed to shine red at the right angle. It was slightly warmer where they were suggesting that Hannibal had gone south during their trek.

Though, to be honest, they could be on a different continent, and Will wouldn't have known.

It took him a moment to orient himself, trying to see where the sun was relative to its position when they left. Hannibal walked slowly forward, dipping his head now and then to sniff something before continuing.

Eventually, they came upon a strange rock formation. Covering it looked like moss and vines, which weaves over a dome structure. The bushes and trees were denser around the formation as though they were hiding something. Will's eyes jumped over the structure, wondering how much of it was made naturally and how much was made from outside influence.

Hannibal lowered himself once they were closer, letting Will slide off his back and stand on wobbly legs. Hannibal shifted to his other form, holding Will carefully as he tried to regain his balance. Then he walked forward, gently pulling Will after him. They walked closer to the cluster of bushes and trees that surrounded the dome structure. Hannibal pulled them to one side, and suddenly Will saw a gently sloping path in front of the dome structure. Hannibal walked down first, offering his hand to Will to guide him along.

Will followed him, watching as he slowly sank below the cluster of bushes.

As they walked downward, Will could see the vines extending from where they covered the dome, completely covering any opening in the rock. The temperature rose as they continued downward enough that Will felt the need to unzip his jacket with each step. Eventually, they

landed on a narrow flat strip. Will looked up, seeing the sky far above them through the coverage given by the trees and bushes.

Hannibal reached forward to part the vines. A wave of warm air hit Will like a freight train before Hannibal gestured for him to step through.

Will entered what seemed like a massive cavern. Light filtered in through a source Will couldn't identify, bathing the whole cavern in soft golden light. The walls were neatly carved and rounded as though something had reached in and hallowed out the inside of what Will assumed was the dome-like rock he saw above. Various drawings littered the walls, likely carved into them, possibly even by Hannibal. The same grey rock formed a stone floor that led to a pool of clear blue water in the center. The pool stretched toward the back of the cavern, where a wall of water fell, constantly filling the pool. Will could almost swear the cavern stretched back more behind the waterfall, but he couldn't be certain.

He looked around more, awe coloring most of his vision. On one side of the cavern was what looked like a bed, with various leaves, twigs, and blankets all piled together. The drawings were denser around the bed as though whoever slept there drew before sleeping. On the other side of the cavern looked like a garden with carefully cultivated flowers of all kinds. Will could see the same flowers Hannibal had given him over and over — the blue ones the same color as his eyes, red roses, white carnations — and the neatly cut stems where other flowers had previously grown. There were other plants there too, tomatoes and various kinds of berries.

Some of the dirt to the far edge of the garden looked like it had been recently displaced. Will wondered what was planted there, though most of his attention was on everything else around him.

Hannibal stood off to the side, reminding Will of the night Hannibal brought him Winston. He waited patiently as Will inspected the cavern, hands almost fidgeting as he watched.

"What is this place?" Will asked, eyes still roaming.

It is, or was, my home.

"Your home? You live here? Lived here?" Will corrected himself as he spoke, just as Hannibal had. Without saying it outright, both knew Hannibal had a new home even though that was something neither had ever discussed nor agreed on. Yet they both knew it, and neither protested the fact that Hannibal's new home was Will's house.

For many years.

"It's beautiful."

Will focused more on the drawings, scanning them as he followed the length of the cavern walls. There were drawings of campsites, fires, mountains that Will had never seen before, rivers, fish, Quantico. As Will neared what he assumed was Hannibal's bed, the pictures grew more and more specific. Drawings of dogs, Will's house, Will himself. But there were others.

One specifically looked like a smaller version of Hannibal but not exactly like Hannibal himself.

Mischa.

"Your sister?" Will asked though he knew the answer. Hannibal nodded anyway, moving to stand next to Will. He reached forward, stroking the picture of her with one of his knuckles before pulling his hand back.

Then Hannibal tugged him forward toward another set of drawings. These were of Will, too, except Will knew immediately that this was the day they met. Hannibal must have drawn it from memory from the moment before Will noticed him. He was looking away, his fishing rod in hand, but his gaze elsewhere, a thousand miles from where he stood. Hannibal reached forward again, stroking the picture as he had Mischa's, then turning to Will himself, his knuckles brushing over Will's cheek.

"Hannibal," Will began, though he didn't quite know what he was going to say.

Luckily he didn't have to say anything as Hannibal tugged him closer, ducking his head to press his forehead against Will's. Will wrapped his arms around Hannibal, tugging him closer. Hannibal nudged Will, causing him to tilt his head back more until their lips met.

It was a quick, chaste kiss, but it still made Will's heart skip a beat. Hannibal pulled away then pointed at the pool.

Would you like to go for a swim?

"Won't it be cold?"

Hannibal shook his head then beckoned Will to follow him until they were kneeling next to the pool. Then Hannibal reached into the water, gesturing for Will to do the same. Will stuck his hand in the water and was immediately surprised at how warm it was. In fact, the whole cavern was warm when they entered and still was, even though Will had grown used to it.

"Is this a hot spring or-"

Hannibal cocked his head.

"It's water heated by geologic activity. I don't know all the details; just that keeps waters warm even in winter."

I see.

"I don't have a swimsuit-" Will trailed off, his mind supplying the alternative to a swimsuit.

Hannibal slipped into the water before Will cut himself off, waiting patiently in the pool. Will chuckled to himself. Hannibal never seemed to mind his constant nudity, making Will wonder how much Hannibal would care for his nakedness.

He sighed and pulled off his backpack and jacket, then kicked off his shoes. The stone floor was cooler than the air but still warmer than outside. Hannibal politely turned as Will undressed; though it would ultimately be pointless, he would be able to see all of Will in the water. Will briefly debated leaving his briefs on before tugging them off as well, thinking of how long it would take them to dry. Even though Hannibal could seemingly fly, it wouldn't be comfortable for either of them to deal with wet clothing for too long.

Will stepped into the water slowly at first, then practically melted into the heat of it.

Hannibal turned back around when he entered, eyes dutifully glued to his face. Will didn't know how he knew, but he always did.

How do you feel?

"Warm," Will admitted with a happy sigh.

Hannibal stepped closer, pulling Will back against him once more.

For the first time, the bare skin of Will's chest brushed against Hannibal's, and the feeling made him shiver. He had touched Hannibal before, but not like this. This was different, new, and Will desperately wanted more.

He refused to act on it, though, keeping himself from pressing against Hannibal fully.

They stood there for a while, just holding each other as the water heated them both.

Will couldn't help but wonder, though, if Hannibal lived in such a warm place, why was he so cold when they first met? And why was he warmer now?

The thought faded quickly as Hannibal's arm wrapped around his lower back, pressing their stomachs together.

There's more if you'll let me show you.

Will nodded, unable to say anything, the words caught in his throat. Hannibal tugged him along to the point that Will barely had to swim as Hannibal kept him upright. They neared the waterfall before Hannibal tugged him closer still, pulling Will entirely into his arms.

Hold your breath.

Will obeyed, and Hannibal pulled them both underwater. The heat nearly made Will gasp before he felt the pressure from the water falling above them. It didn't take long for them to surface again, Hannibal apparently as fast on land as on water.

Will gasped as they surfaced, though it wasn't the need for air that caused him to do so.

The other side of the waterfall was dramatically different. Crystals grew out of the walls, the same light from the other side illuminating them to the point they cast rays of their own against the wall of water. Pink, purple, blue crystals decorated everything, and the rays of light they cast seemed to bathe the whole area in firelight. Hannibal had set him down by this

point, though he didn't let Will go. It didn't matter to Will, as he gripped Hannibal's shoulders while staring, eyes following every ray of light they could find.

"Oh my god," Will whispered, awed to the point that speaking louder felt sacrilegious. "It's... beyond beautiful."

I've seen that. This doesn't compare.

Will dropped his head and raised an eyebrow, making eye contact with Hannibal. "What do you mean?"

Hannibal raised his hand, gently stroking Will's cheek. *You.*

Will opened his mouth, then closed it again and opened it once more, his stomach backflipping.

Hannibal leaned forward once more, his forehead touching Will's, then tilting their heads so their lips could meet. Will scrambled to hold Hannibal, his hands gripping solid shoulders.

Hannibal kissed him deeply and passionately, having caught on quickly to how kissing worked. Will found himself clinging to Hannibal, their kisses quickly becoming heated. Will's heart hammered in his chest as he clung to Hannibal, lips meeting over and over. It took the entirety of his restraint to keep himself from pressing against Hannibal; discomfort be damned. He wanted nothing more than to press against Hannibal fully, to remove the last of the barriers between them.

He would even let Hannibal have him here in this breathtaking cave.

Did Hannibal's species even have sex? And was it at all like humans? What if Hannibal didn't want that?

Will forced himself to keep some distance between them, not letting their lower bodies brush and fighting down the arousal that came with their heated kisses.

Their kisses grew more and more frantic, each one warmer and hungrier than the last. Will's fingers dug into Hannibal's flesh, scrambling for purchase against his shoulder blades.

Hannibal withdrew for a moment, and Will chased him, dragging him back into another set of passionate kisses. God, he wanted more.

Maybe-

Will shut down that train of thought before it even started. He wouldn't; he couldn't risk ruining this thing between them, whatever it was. Hannibal had quickly become the most important person in Will's life and the only person he'd ever felt so connected to. For the first time, he wasn't alone. He had been alone, even more alone than he realized, until Hannibal. But with Hannibal, he was understood, happy even. He wouldn't risk losing that over something as trivial as human desire.

Hannibal released Will's lips but quickly buried his face in Will's neck, dragging Will closer in the process. He gasped as Hannibal inhaled, his hands tightening on Hannibal's shoulder and neck.

It took everything within him to force his arousal down, swallowing thickly as Hannibal buried his nose in Will's neck, once again intrigued.

He willed himself to relax, and after a while, it worked. Hannibal righted himself, holding Will against him with one arm and stroking his cheek with the other hand.

Eventually, the two of them ventured back through the waterfall to the pile of Will's clothes and their lunch on the other side. Will dressed somewhat, letting the rest of him dry off in the warm air of the cave as they ate, the two of them shoulder to shoulder. Hannibal explained some of the other drawings, telling him about the places he lived before finding Will. Will wondered how old he was but didn't bother to ask, too busy listening to Hannibal talk to think about anything else.

Once Will was dry more, Hannibal led them back out of the cave and changed once more into his deer form. Then they were hurtling again, the two of them flying back toward Wolf Trap and a home that belonged to them.

Once they were there, Will let the dogs out and sat on the porch with Hannibal while they roamed. Once in a while, one of them would come up to them to sniff, then sneeze and run away, finding something else to entertain them. The sun was setting by the time they returned home, and Will could see the edges of it on the horizon.

"Thank you," Will said. "For today."

You're welcome. Thank you for coming with me.

Will smiled and leaned toward Hannibal, who wrapped an arm around Will's shoulder, tucking him into his side. Will smiled slightly, letting himself be held by Hannibal, the two of them watching the sunset together.

Chapter 16

Weeks went by, and things between Hannibal and Will began to settle once more. Cases came and went, Will taught his classes, and every morning and night, Will woke up and fell asleep beside Hannibal, who always said something when Will was too far into sleep to understand. Kissing grew easier as Will learned how to settle himself. That didn't mean that he was any less wound up when it came to kissing Hannibal. In fact, it was worse. Every day was a fight to keep himself from pushing, from pressing closer, from clearing that last little gap between them. But that fight was one he won more often than not, and even when he lost, he found some excuse to leave and handle it on his own.

If Hannibal ever noticed, he didn't say anything.

Will almost envied Hannibal for how easy it seemed for him. Emotions didn't affect him the same way they had Will. Will wondered if that was because he was more used to his emotions if they came easier to him than they had for Will. It wasn't that Will wasn't an emotional person, but often the emotions he experienced weren't his own. So to feel his own emotions and to have them so strongly influenced by Hannibal was new to him. Will never really had strong emotions when it came to anyone, not even his own father. But with Hannibal, it was different. Everything was different with Hannibal. Easier. And easy wasn't something Will was used to.

Will spent most of his days thinking about Hannibal. He wondered what Hannibal did when he was busy; he watched for antlers on the side of the road. He even dreamed about Hannibal, about the future and a life that he never thought was possible before Hannibal appeared.

Cases were more manageable too. He didn't come home with killers running around his brain. He could leave them behind at the scenes of their own making without dragging them with him. And the killers that had already taken up residence in Will's mind seemed to vanish as time went on. No longer did they pop up behind his eyelids; blood wasn't the most common feature of his dreams. The darkness in the world stopped taking little pieces of him, letting his own darkness linger within him without tearing at him.

Others noticed it too. Alana kept a particularly close eye on him at crime scenes, expecting him to leave shaken as he would have in the past. But he never did. He didn't need the scene cleared and silenced as he did before; the world could exist around him without him drowning in it.

Price and Zeller seemed to tolerate him more, neither of them side-eyeing Will as they used to, and Beverly greeted him with more smiles than normal, no longer afraid that he was going to snap at her for them.

Jack seemed more willing to call him on cases, but Will found that saying no was an option.

Never before had it been like this; never before had Will felt like it could be like this.

It took Will longer than he would have liked to realize he had anchored himself to Hannibal. He had always known that's what he needed, someone to act as his paddle while he navigated the waters around him. Someone steady and solid who didn't bend under the weight of Will's darkness. But relying on other people wasn't something Will liked doing. Will had always hated the idea that he needed someone else. People were unreliable, and worse, they left. And Will knew floundering without help, to begin with, was better than the tailspin that would come from having help then losing it.

But Hannibal-

Hannibal never felt like he was going anywhere and Will was having trouble even remembering a time before Hannibal. It felt like he had always been there, like the space beside Will had always belonged to him.

The only person brave enough to corner him about the newness of his stability was Beverly. Unlike Alana, Beverly was seemed completely unsurprised when he told her that the someone he met was a 'he.' Like Alana, though, she demanded to know more. Will found himself trying to navigate the slippery slope of talking about Hannibal without explaining too much. When it became evident that Will wasn't going to reveal too much, Beverly managed to surprise him with one question.

"Does he make you happy?"

"Yes," Will answered honestly and for once, without hesitation.

Hannibal did make him happy; he was genuinely happy for the first time in a long time because of Hannibal.

Sweet, gentle, but also vicious Hannibal, who held him when they slept and kissed him goodbye every morning. Who looked at Will and saw the darkness within him and never once shied away. He encouraged him even and was willing to be there no matter what.

Will arrived home to his monster waiting for him, another flower in hand. For the first time, Will knew where those flowers came from. He had seen where they were grown, cultivated by Hannibal's own hand and picked just for him. But there was something else in Hannibal's hands, too, something that Will only saw as he drew closer.

It was a feather, but not just any feather. Will would know that feather anywhere. It was one of Hannibal's either plucked from his own hide or saved when it fell on its own. Hannibal reached for Will, tugging him closer. Then he raised the feather, pressing it against Will's forehead then slowly trailing it down his face, hovering it over his lips briefly. Then he continued downward, dragging the feather over Will's chin then his throat. Then he grasped Will's hands and placed the feather in them. The feather was a piece of him, a piece he offered Will in addition to everything else he had given him.

"Hannibal," Will whispered, turning the soft feather over in his hands. The feather sparkled in the evening sun, making Will's heart hammer and his throat clog with emotion.

He couldn't force another word from his throat with how tight it was. With the feather clutched in one hand, he dragged Hannibal closer with the other, stealing a kiss before he could convince himself it was a bad idea. He didn't hold back, didn't let himself shy away as he pressed against Hannibal, trying to push everything he couldn't force himself to say into the kiss. Will's fingers dug into Hannibal's shoulder, trying desperately to keep them close.

The only thing that broke them apart was the sound of the dogs clawing at the door and whining, desperate to be a part of the activities they were left out of. Will chuckled to himself as he pulled away, still clutching the feather and soon the flower when Hannibal offered him that too.

He let the dogs out then stepped inside to drop off his belongings from the day. He tugged off his jacket and set the feather and flower next to the bed, his fingers stroking over them gently. He didn't know why, but he had the distinct feeling that the feather was one Hannibal pulled from himself rather than one that fell, and that made Will's heart hammer once again. He let his fingers trail over the feather once more before letting it rest on the bedside table, knowing it would be there when he fell asleep and when he woke up.

He ventured back outside, the chill of the day hitting him, but it wasn't enough to make him uncomfortable. The sight Will caught warmed him even more, though, enough that he could have stood in the cold naked, and it wouldn't have bothered him.

In his yard, the dogs played, falling over themselves as they ran together. With them was Hannibal in his deer form, running amongst the dogs. They tried to keep up with him, and Hannibal moved slowly enough that it must have felt like he was shuffling through molasses, but he didn't seem to mind.

Will watched as Hannibal dropped, mimicking the same positions the dogs fell into when they were playing before they ran, Hannibal following them.

His feathers threw off sparkles that decorated the snow, all of them golden in the sunset.

Will leaned against one of the pillars on the porch, watching.

Hannibal trotted around the dogs before taking off in one direction, letting the dogs catch up, then running in the other. Will couldn't help but smile at the sight, seeing amusement in Hannibal's amber eyes. The sunset bathed everything in gold, making Hannibal's eyes almost look crimson. The dogs caught up, playfully biting at Hannibal, who collapsed on the ground, rolled over, and popped back up before dropping into the same playful position. Will's throat grew thick again as Hannibal wore the dogs out.

Winston was the last dog still playing with Hannibal by the time the sun set. The rest had drifted back toward Will, a few lying on the porch around him while others went inside to take a drink of water and then promptly fell asleep.

Will let Buster in when Winston came trotting up to him, tail wagging and panting. He neared Will and head-butted his leg before walking through the door Will held open for him.

Hannibal shook himself before shifting back into his other form. Will's eyes drifted over the yard as Hannibal neared, seeing hoofprints and pawprints that showed the story of the dogs and Hannibal dancing around each other.

Hannibal neared, brushing the last of dirt and snow off of him before he stepped to the porch. As he had done before, he grabbed the mat and set it down, wiping his hooves before replacing the mat and looking to Will.

Will couldn't help but stare at him, the door slipping through his fingers as he did.

He truly was beautiful, whether in his deer form or in the form he was now, his antlers stretching toward the sky, as beautiful as a crown.

"I love you," Will said without even realizing the words were there until he said them. But once he did, he found he had no intention of taking them back.

Hannibal blinked once before he was on Will, tugging him into his arms and kissing him passionately. Will felt dizzy under the onslaught, but he wanted nothing more than to drown in it.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

Hannibal chanted the words over and over, making them swim around Will's mind. Hannibal pinned Will to the pillar he had been leaning on, pressing himself against Will fully, using his weight to pin him, keeping them together.

Hannibal stole the breath from Will's lungs before parting briefly to give Will some reprieve. Then he was back on him again, lifting Will into his arms. Before Will realized what was happening, the two of them were suddenly inside. Will only noticed when he heard the door shut behind them before the two of them landed on the bed, arms and legs tangled together. Will gripped Hannibal tightly, hearing the same three words chanted over and over by Hannibal, who seemed unable to stop saying them once he started.

Hannibal tucked Will under him, uncaring for the fact that his antlers scrapped against the wall. Will could barely care either. The wall could be repaired, but Hannibal-

Beautiful, brilliant, gentle, brutal, protective, caring Hannibal mattered more. He was here and in Will's arms, kissing him so desperately that Will could feel his own desperation rising in response.

He wanted more. He needed more. He needed Hannibal. Lovely, sweet Hannibal. His Hannibal. His monster.

His. His. His. His.

Hannibal hadn't fully settled against Will, no matter how much Will kept tugging. He couldn't resist, and he began to wonder if he even wanted to anymore. Hannibal loved him; he had loved him for a while. But only now was Will beginning to realize what kind of love it was. He understood what Hannibal meant, what the purity of his love meant for Will. And Will

now knew those feelings that had been building, that warmed him from the inside, that made him cling to Hannibal in the night and reluctant to leave in the morning, were the same as Hannibal's feelings for him.

Pure and beautiful.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

He had seen all of Hannibal, both forms he occupied, the gentleness, the viciousness and brutality, and everything in between. Hannibal had cooked him meals even after he told Will he had never cooked before. He took care of Will's dogs, held Will, and fought off the nightmares that plagued him for years. He took care of Will after his injury and, in all that time, had never asked for anything more. All he wanted was Will, however he would give himself. And Will found he was willing to give Hannibal everything. All of him for all of Hannibal.

"Hannibal," Will managed between kisses. "Hannibal, please."

Hannibal pulled back, white eyes finding Will's even in the darkening room around them.

Are you sure?

"Oh god yes," Will whispered. "Hannibal, please."

Hannibal bent to kiss him again. As he did, as their lips met, Hannibal slowly lowered himself, pressing against Will entirely.

And just like Will, he was hard.

Chapter 17

Will's body arched into Hannibal's automatically the moment they were pressed together. He couldn't stop the slight whine that escaped his throat at the feeling, though Hannibal quickly swallowed the sound. Their kisses grew deeper and more heated as Will's hands scrambled for purchase against Hannibal's body. It felt good to have Hannibal against him like this, and for a moment, Will forgot why he had denied them both this before. Hannibal, for his part, seemed perfectly content over Will as he was now.

One of Will's hands gripped Hannibal's shoulder blade, fingers digging into his flesh. The other cupped the back of Hannibal's head, holding them in their kisses. Hannibal's hands had moved under Will's body, keeping them pressed together. Will could feel his claws as they dug through his shirt, but oddly they didn't seem as sharp as they were when Hannibal killed Tier. In fact, so much of Hannibal had changed in the time they had known each other.

He was no longer as cold as he once was, though he was still cool to the touch. Will couldn't help but think it would always be that way, given how warm he was on a daily basis. But there were other things too, the dulling of his claws, the way he acted around Will. He never acted like Will was a skittish animal anymore, ready to run at any moment. They had grown used to each other, and along with it came comfort at being in each other's space.

Will tried to think of a time when he had taken a lover before Hannibal who he was comfortable with prior to sex, and his mind drew a blank. Never before Hannibal had he known or felt so connected to another person that he wanted sex as another way to show that connection. But with Hannibal, it felt almost natural to take this step. It wasn't sex just to fill a carnal desire, though that was undoubtedly part of it; there was more too. A need for connection that extended beyond the bond they forged already.

Will wrapped one of his legs around Hannibal's, the touch electrifying even through his clothes. Hannibal ground down against him, forcing another whine from Will's throat.

"Have you- do you-" Will tried, his mouth unable to form the words his mind tried to conjure.

I have had sex before if that's what you're asking. Hannibal said, sounding far more put together than Will was at the moment, though he wondered how much the telepathy played a part in that.

"When?" Will asked, fingers digging into Hannibal's skin even more, mostly out of possession.

We can regale each other with past lovers at another time. But no one has ever meant as much as you.

Will nearly attacked Hannibal with another series of kisses, each more heated and lingering than the last. Hannibal spoke again when they broke apart for a breath.

If you're wondering how it works, I've come across enough humans on accident in the throes of passion to know how similar it is.

"People just have sex in the woods?"

More often than you think.

Will chuckled then tilted his head to steal another series of kisses. These ended when Hannibal broke away, though he didn't leave Will for too long. His lips trailed over Will's cheek, and Will turned his head automatically to accommodate Hannibal when he continued downward from there, burying his face in Will's neck. He could hear Hannibal's inhale before soft lips pressed against his neck, making him shiver.

The hand on the back of Hannibal's head traveled upward, searching out Hannibal's antlers. When Hannibal didn't protest, Will's fingers drifted over them, and Will found himself marveling at the velvety feeling.

Why had he never touched Hannibal's antlers before this?

Hannibal moaned when Will's fingers trailed up his antlers, shivering against his body. Will admired the feeling of his antlers, finding the edge of the tines he could reach, each equally sharp. Will remembered these same antlers goring Tier, the same claws that pressed against Will's back tearing through flesh. But with Will, that was never a risk.

Hannibal drifted to the other side of Will's neck, lips pressing against the sensitive flesh he found there.

Will let his hands drift back down Hannibal's body, fingers exploring places he had never dared explore before. He could feel the muscles of Hannibal's back tensing under his fingers, each one sensitive to Will's explorations.

Hannibal captured his lips again, stealing his breath in the process.

Are you sure you want this? He asked when he pulled back. He withdrew a hand from under Will to gently stroke his cheek with the backs of his knuckles as he spoke.

"I want this. You," Will answered without hesitation.

You seemed so hesitant before.

"I was trying not to make you uncomfortable."

I worried I would make you uncomfortable.

Will smiled slightly, reaching to stroke Hannibal's cheek and the curve of his cheekbone. "You never have. I feel comfortable with you. Safe."

I will always protect you.

"I know," Will said with a smile before tugging Hannibal back down into another kiss.

Hannibal kissed him again, deeply, passionately, making Will's head spin and his heart gallop in his chest. Hannibal's hands traveled back down his body, claws pressing into Will's shirt. Will could feel tiny pinpricks where the edges, even dulled, touched his skin. But Hannibal would never hurt him, not unless Will asked him to.

The same, however, could not be said for Will's shirt as those same dulled claws tore through it. Hannibal tugged the tattered remnants of Will's shirt aside, pressing them together, chest to chest. Will sucked in a breath at the electric feeling of the skin-to-skin contact, no longer dulled by the little distance left between them. There was nothing between them now, save for a few inches of fabric, but that hardly mattered. Not compared to the feeling of the last barrier between them removed.

Will wrapped his arms around Hannibal, determined to hold them closer for a moment, to bathe in the feeling of nearness.

Hannibal peppered kisses along Will's shoulder and upper arm, careful to angle his head in just the right way to avoid Will having a face full of antlers. Will couldn't help but crane his neck slightly, pressing a kiss to the closest tine he could reach.

Hannibal shuddered and reclaimed Will's mouth, stealing his breath once again. Will could taste the same distinct flavor on Hannibal's tongue, one that he couldn't help but think was Hannibal himself, a taste associated just with him.

Hannibal's hands trailed downward, toying with the top of his pants.

"Just tear them too, I don't care," Will panted against Hannibal's lips, determined to recapture them. The clothes were just a nuisance, and Will couldn't care less about them.

Hannibal's claws tore through Will's pants and briefs before he wrapped his hand around the back of Will's thigh and tugged his leg forward, forcing their groins to connect and cocks to brush. Will moaned loudly, arching into Hannibal, desperate for more.

The touch seemed to ignite Hannibal, too, as his previous slow and gentle demeanor turned frantic the moment they were pressed together. His grip on Will became tighter as he rocked against Will, breaths coming in pants. Will gripped Hannibal, too, thrusting upward in the same frantic, needy manner.

"Will," Hannibal said, fingers digging into Will's thigh.

Will looked at him, making eye contact even as his arousal worsened.

Slowly.

"We have time for slow later. I want you now."

"Will."

"Hannibal," Will protested. "Please."

The please seemed to persuade Hannibal the most as soon he was dipping his head to reclaim Will's mouth once more, rutting against him just as fervently as Will was. The friction gave Will a better idea of Hannibal's cock, and the feeling of it already had his arousal at the tipping point. It had been some years since he'd had sex with a man, but he had never wanted anyone the way he wanted Hannibal. The last time he'd had sex with a man, he had done the penetration. Now, all he wanted was Hannibal inside him already.

Hannibal bucked against him, the slide of their cocks becoming easier and easier with how aroused they were.

Do you have-

"In the drawer," Will answered without even needing to know the rest of Hannibal's question.

He reluctantly let go of Hannibal to tug the drawer of the bedside table open and rummaged inside for lube. Will barely retrieved it when Hannibal took it, rolling Will onto his back.

I'll be gentle.

"Be quick," Will instructed instead.

I don't want to hurt you.

"I don't mind."

"Will."

"Hannibal," Will insisted instead, bucking his hips to demand Hannibal's attention. "Please. I want to feel you."

Hannibal prepared him quickly, claws gently scraping along Will's inner walls. It never hurt, and every movement, every slide, every finger added made Will's arousal build until it was nearly consuming. He wanted, he needed, and nothing was happening quick enough. Hannibal was still too far away, fingers scissoring Will open even as Will bucked his hips impatiently. Will ground down on Hannibal's fingers, feeling the edges of claws threaten to press into him.

It reminded him of the danger Hannibal constantly presented to everyone but Will. He had seen Hannibal's viciousness; the very claws now buried in Will's body had torn apart more than one person in Hannibal's life. And yet, Hannibal had always been kind and gentle with him. And God, Will wanted his teeth. He wanted the viciousness; he wanted the monster; he wanted the edge of danger that Hannibal presented. He wanted everything, not just the dulled edges. He wanted Hannibal completely.

Will tugged at Hannibal, who eventually relented, covering Will's body with his own.

Are you sure? Hannibal asked again.

"Yes. I want you, Hannibal."

Hannibal's lips fell on his, their bodies folding together. Will wondered if he had ever been so completely at ease with someone in the past. Hannibal was familiar enough that even the slight press of their bodies felt like Will was coming home. He was at home, in Hannibal's arms, and that was completely new. Never before had he had someone like Hannibal, a safe place, a home. And Hannibal offered that. That and more.

"Please," Will begged again.

Hannibal pressed into him slowly, giving in to Will's pleading.

"Don't let go," Will begged as Hannibal pressed into him.

Never. Hannibal promised, finally bottoming out.

Will felt full, fuller than he ever had in his life. But it wasn't just because of Hannibal's admittedly nice, large cock. It was more than that, as though Hannibal had filled a void within Will that he didn't even realize he had anymore. He had become so numb to it that he forgot it was there until it was gone entirely.

Will sobbed at the nearness of Hannibal. His monster tugged him closer and buried Will against himself.

"Please, please," Will didn't even know what he was begging for, just that begging was something he needed to do.

Hannibal began to shift, not moving far, but enough that Will could feel his cock grinding again his walls. Hannibal's cock was big enough that he didn't have to angle to brush Will's prostate; he just did with every movement. Will clung to him, nails digging into the meat of his shoulder. Will could hear the soft taps of Hannibal's antlers against the wall, every movement accompanied by them, but it was background noise, a blip on Will's over-saturated radar.

All he knew was Hannibal. Hannibal pressed against him, the feeling of him between Will's thighs, the strength of his arms as they wrapped around Will's body.

Will rolled his hips in time with Hannibal, his whole body on fire.

Hannibal's skin was cool against his still, though Will could feel him warming with the exertion. Hannibal ducked his head, pressing his forehead against Will's, their breath warming the space between them.

"Will," Hannibal whispered.

Will forced his eyes open.

I need you to promise me something.

"What?" Will asked, his brain barely comprehending what Hannibal said beyond the pleasure that roared through his veins.

Don't let me go.

Will shivered at the request, his grip on Hannibal tightening. "Never."

Hannibal sat up at that, tugging Will with him until Will was seated in his lap. He gasped at the feeling, Hannibal's cock was deeper, and he felt fuller. He wondered, if he dared release the death grip on Hannibal, if he could feel Hannibal's cock when he pressed against his abdomen. But he couldn't force himself to do anything other than cling to Hannibal.

Despite Will's earlier desperation, their movements were slow. Will could barely force himself to lift his hips, the distance already too much.

I love you.

"I love you, Hannibal," Will nearly sobbed the words, pressing closer still.

He needed...

He needed...

More.

He was missing something. Something wasn't right. Something wasn't there that should be. Hannibal wasn't close enough, even buried so far in Will; he was fucking the breath from his lungs.

Please.

Will barely heard the word, as though it was whispered even though it was telepathic.

His brain tried frantically to understand what Hannibal was pleading for. Hannibal's face was buried in his neck at this point, his breath hot against Will's throat. Will gripped him tightly, their bodies still grinding. Will could barely lift his hips, but every fall, though minor, was met by an immediate thrust of Hannibal's.

Hannibal's teeth scraped over Will's neck gently, not enough to draw blood but enough to remind Will where he was. What he could do.

And Will's brain finally caught up to what he wanted.

The mating bond.

Blood. It needed blood. And consent.

Hannibal was asking for consent.

How do you know? How do you know that the person you want to form the bond with is the right one?

You know.

Hannibal was right. Will knew he was right. Because he *knew.*

Don't let me go.

Never.

Will turned his head, baring his neck to Hannibal.

"Yes," He breathed, eyes closing and heart pounding. This was it. This was what he was missing. He knew. Hannibal was it. Only Hannibal. Always Hannibal.

Hannibal's teeth sunk into his neck hard enough to draw blood. Will supposed it helped that Hannibal's teeth were fangs, making it easier for him to draw blood from Will's neck. Will gasped at the feeling, first in pain, then in an odd sort of ecstasy. Hannibal felt closer already, as though their very hearts were pressed together. And that served to drive Will mad.

His pleasure skyrocketed, and his grip on Hannibal tightened to the point of bruising.

Hannibal withdrew, quickly tugging Will into his own neck.

I'm yours. Forever, Will.

Encouraged by his words, Will bit and then bit harder when Hannibal pressed a hand to the back of his head, silently demanding he draw blood. Will almost withdrew out of fear of hurting Hannibal; a metallic taste met his tongue. Will burrowed closer, sucking lightly at the wound he made. Hannibal moaned and tightened his grip on Will more.

The moment Will withdrew, he felt the bond snap into place.

It felt like his heart started beating in time with Hannibal's. He could feel Hannibal's pleasure coursing through his body; he could feel everywhere they were connected and everywhere they weren't. He could feel Hannibal from the tips of his antlers down to his hooves, every heartbeat, every drop of blood in his body. He could taste Hannibal's arousal on his tongue, could feel every breath Hannibal took as if it was his own. He knew he could live the rest of his life without ever eating again, without ever drinking, without ever breathing because Hannibal himself provided his very nourishment. And Hannibal, beautiful Hannibal, burned brightly in Will's arms, his very essence calling out to Will's, tangling with his own until Will couldn't tell where one ended and the other began.

He knew they fell, but he didn't really comprehend the fall itself. Every molecule in Will's body was too busy twining with Hannibal's, their very DNA twisting with each other's until they were joined on every possible level.

Will could feel Hannibal's adoration, his love, his utter devotion.

And Will's own emotions felt amplified. He thought he had loved Hannibal before, but that didn't compare to this. What was then a fleeting glance of sunlight through a hole in a suffocating box was now a supernova, consuming everything.

Will would happily burn alive for Hannibal.

He barely even noticed when he came, far too consumed by Hannibal himself to even care. He did know, though, when Hannibal came almost immediately after him. His release coated Will's insides, heating them in a new way, in a comfortable way. Hannibal's pleasure was a life-saving fire that Will curled close to, needing it and him.

Hannibal tucked Will against him, neither of them able to pull apart. They couldn't even force themselves to move up the bed toward the pillows. Somehow they managed to pull a pillow down, their heads resting on it, foreheads touching. Hannibal pulled the blanket Will had given to him a lifetime ago around them both, and for the first time, Will understood the depth of such things.

Nests, beds, they weren't just important. They were sacred. And Hannibal wanted nothing more than to worship Will in theirs. Will had never understood religious devotion before, but he did now. He would worship Hannibal for eternity, whether it was curling together in a sacred space between them or gripping Hannibal between his thighs to offer himself in sacrifice.

He could feel Hannibal's awe at him, his need to hold Will closer. Will didn't fight; he didn't want to. He let himself be tugged closer, to be protected by his lovely Hannibal.

Will woke in the morning feeling slightly sore but mostly in heaven. He thought maybe he had died during the night, that the feeling now was what came after being consumed by the god he had given himself to so thoroughly. He would gladly be consumed; he would tear out his own heart first.

Will stretched. Somewhere during the night, they had switched positions. Will's back was against Hannibal's chest, and Hannibal's arm was wrapped around him, holding him.

Will reached for Hannibal's hand, gently stroking the back of it. Hannibal's fingers flexed, and soon Will's hand was twining with his.

Will's eyes flew open. The hand entwined with his wasn't Hannibal's.

It was a claw-less, very human hand.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will launched himself out of bed, heart racing and thoughts running.

Where was Hannibal? What happened? Was Hannibal hurt?

The man in Will's bed sat up slowly, amber eyes watching Will closely. He was naked, only covered by Hannibal's blanket from the waist down. He had sharp cheekbones and a strong jaw, broad shoulders, and almost piano player fingers. But what Will's eyes kept catching the most was the hair atop his head and on his chest. This wasn't Hannibal, no matter how familiar the person seemed. And he was familiar. Part of Will felt like he had known the man his whole life, as though he had been there in the background and Will was only seeing him for the first time.

But that didn't matter. Hannibal mattered.

"Who are you? Where's Hannibal?"

The man reached for him, and Will raised his hand to stop him, to bat his hand away, but their fingers brushed. Will was frozen, his mind stilling and his body locked in place. The man smiled a soft, beautiful smile, and reeled Will in, his grip becoming tighter. Will couldn't help but let himself be dragged closer; his body obeyed a silent command. The man pulled him back onto the bed and into his arms, settling Will in his lap.

"Will."

That voice. Will knew that voice. And this touch. And this body.

"Hannibal?"

"Hello, my love," Hannibal answered, smiling at him softly still. He reached for Will, pushing some strands of hair off his forehead then dropping his hand slightly to cup Will's cheek. Will gaped as Hannibal continued to touch him gently, fingers and eyes roaming. His voice, *his voice*, was so familiar to Will that he couldn't remember a time when it hadn't sounded like that. Hannibal's voice had a slight accent, one Will couldn't place, but Will knew Hannibal had lived elsewhere before finding himself in Virginia.

Will closed his mouth and then opened it again, but his words kept failing him. He had no words: just pure awe and wonder.

"I've rendered you speechless, haven't I, my darling?" Hannibal's fingers trailed over Will's lips, then down his chin, an action he had done previously with flowers and feathers, but now with his own hand. A human hand.

Will's eyes skittered over Hannibal's body, taking in this new form. This human form. He was human. No antlers, no claws. Will assumed that if he looked at Hannibal's feet, they would be human. The only things that seemed to remain were Hannibal's fangs, still slightly evident in the soft smiles he offered Will. Sunlight gleamed off his eyes, human eyes, making them almost look crimson before they were amber again.

"You're beautiful," Hannibal said, eyes still roaming. "I could see you every day for eternity, and each time you are more beautiful than the last."

"Hannibal-"

"Yes, my love?"

"You're human." Will felt almost dumbstruck, unable to do more than state the obvious.

"Not fully. This is just how I look."

"How?" Will asked. "Could you do it the whole time? Why now?"

Hannibal smiled softly at him again, both his hands raising to hold Will's face before he ran his fingers through Will's hair. "I will answer all of your questions, but for a moment, will you let me look at you with new eyes, feel you with new hands?"

Will opened his mouth to answer but found his words failing him again. Instead, he nodded, and Hannibal tugged him closer. Their foreheads touched first, then their noses when Hannibal nuzzled him gently. Then he tilted his head, pressing their lips together. Will knew for certain with the press of soft lips that this was Hannibal. His Hannibal. Will's arms wrapped around him automatically, holding Hannibal closer. Hannibal's arms wrapped around him in return, fingers dancing over his back. Their kisses grew deeper as Will's hands roamed, refamiliarizing himself with the feel of Hannibal's body. A body he had only truly explored last night and now was different. Yet, it was similar at the same time.

Hannibal tugged them both down onto the bed again, wrapping his blanket around them both.

Will couldn't have put up a fight even if he wanted to, his whole being wanting nothing more than to go where Hannibal directed.

Hannibal leaned closer to kiss him again, their kisses slow and gentle.

"Of all the things you've taught me, that is my favorite," Hannibal whispered when they pulled apart.

Will smiled slightly, and Hannibal tugged him closer.

"You have questions," Hannibal said.

"Yes."

"Then ask."

Will thought for a moment, a million questions running around his brain. "Is this...permanent?"

Hannibal smiled and reached to stroke Will's cheek once again. Then, as Will watched, his eyes changed, shifting back into the same entirely white color Will was used to. Then he blinked, and his eyes were human again, amber. The same color, Will realized, as his eyes in his deer form.

"I am not human; my true form is not human. This form is by choice."

"The mating bond?" Will guess, and Hannibal nodded with another smile.

"The mating bond is a strong bond among the strongest. It can move mountains and calm storms. Like the worry you felt earlier."

"All you had to do was touch me, and I knew it was you," Will said.

Hannibal nodded again. "You asked me once how my species knew if their mate was the right person. The bond cannot come from nothing. It cannot be forced. There has to be something there already for the bond to form. And the deeper the connection initially, the stronger the mating bond becomes."

"And ours? How strong is ours?"

"My parents had a mating bond, and neither could calm the other with merely a touch."

Will's heart backflipped in his chest. "So it's strong."

"Incredibly," Hannibal answered. "You could persuade me to do most anything, and I would be powerless to resist."

Will smiled at that and filed the thought away for later. "What about how you speak? You're talking out loud."

Hannibal nodded again. "Yes. It's odd. Speech like this is uniquely human." He paused. *But it is not the only way I can speak.*

Will felt himself smiling at the familiarity of Hannibal's telepathy. His Hannibal was still there, even if he looked a little different. Will had to admit that this form was beautiful too. Every version of Hannibal was beautiful. There was no version of Hannibal, whether human, stag, or the combination of the two Will had fallen in love with that wasn't beautiful to him. He had never seen anyone as beautiful as Hannibal. His Hannibal. His monster. And now his human.

"How?" Will asked. "How are you human?"

Hannibal's grip on Will tightened. "Because you are." Will raised an eyebrow in question, and Hannibal continued. "There are things about the mating bond that I did not tell you because I didn't want you to feel obligated to make the bond or to change who you are." Hannibal paused for a moment. "The bond allows those bonded to become the species of their mate.

The myth was a god cursed my species, so that love was rare. But another interfered to ensure that even while rare, the love between two was strong, powerful. And from it came the mating bond. It is just a myth, of course, but the bond itself is capable of great things.

"I knew that if we ever formed the bond, I could become like you. But I also knew that you might feel like you had to become like me if you knew that. And I did not want to make you feel like you had to."

"So you changed species for me?" Will asked.

"Yes. And I am glad to. I would give up the world for you, never change into my own species again just to live by your side."

"I wouldn't ask you to, Hannibal," Will answered immediately.

"I know," Hannibal answered with a smile. "Which is why I knew you were always the person I was meant to bond to."

"How long did you know?"

"For a while," Hannibal answered. He stroked over Will's cheek again and then ran through Will's hair, fingers tangling in his curls.

"What else can the bond do?"

Hannibal sighed and, for the first time, looked away from Will. "There is one other thing."

"What is it?"

"The bond-" Hannibal took in a deep breath. "It ensures that one mate can never outlive the other for too long."

"Meaning?" Will prompted.

"You will age slower," Hannibal answered. "My species lives longer than yours with few exceptions." Will thought about Hannibal's sister as he spoke. Would she still be alive if those men had never killed her? "You will age as I do."

Will took a moment to comprehend what he was saying, what Hannibal was telling him. He would live longer than the normal human, age at the same rate as Hannibal. How old was Hannibal anyway? How long would Will live? How long would they have together?

"So," Will began slowly. "We'll have a long time together?"

Hannibal smiled and gazed at him once again, adoration plain on his face. "Yes."

Will smiled and shifted closer, pressing a kiss against soft, familiar lips. When they pulled apart, Will didn't move far, just enough for their foreheads to touch.

"You said I can become like you," He began. "Does that mean I can talk like you do? Mentally?"

Yes.

"How? Can you read my mind?"

Hannibal shook his head. "The thoughts you want me to hear need to be directed at me. I cannot just hear anything. It's only what you want me to hear. Though I can gleam emotions, feel what you feel. And with your empathy, the ability for either of us to detect the other's emotions will likely be heightened more than most."

"Will I be able to shift into a deer like you?"

Hannibal shook his head. "That form is unique to me. You will be able to shift into an animal form, but I don't think it would be a deer. If you could call my other form a deer." Will could hear the tease in Hannibal's voice. They both knew that deer didn't usually have feathers, but Will had no better way to describe Hannibal's other form. Except maybe god-like. Was Hannibal truly a god? Had a god chosen him? Mated with him? Loved him?

"Why me?"

Hannibal smiled softly and shifted closer. "Do you trust me, my darling?"

"Yes," Will answered honestly.

"Then close your eyes."

He obeyed, and Hannibal leaned forward, their foreheads pressing together. For a moment, nothing happened, then Will felt a tug at the back of his mind, as though a string connected him to somewhere outside his body, to Hannibal. He followed the tugging until he felt Hannibal. Hannibal's hands tightened on him, and Will felt his grip tightening in return.

Hannibal was still for a moment, then all at once, everything exploded, and Will *saw.*

Hannibal had lived for a long time. He had seen much in his life. He remembered from a young age watching castles rise and fall, watching armies of men, humans, throw themselves against stone walls, and then watched as the weapons they wielded grew. He had seen countries rise and fall, he had seen more species than he could remember, and he had an excellent memory. Hannibal had witnessed the mating bonds of various species, seeing how it would look for him with his parents and then how different it was for others. He had seen his own species come and go, had seen species grow and then collapse.

But Hannibal didn't see the world the way others did. His world was black and white. There was no color in his world. He could tell seasons by their smells, by the outlines of the leaves on trees, and the animals that entered or hibernated from the world. But all of that was black and white. He could feel the sunlight, yet he could never see it. He could smell flowers, and

yet he never knew their color. He knew the smell of blood and yet never saw the color of it. The world did not exist in color for Hannibal.

Until Will Graham.

Hannibal had been out for a walk in the middle of the day, taking in the scents of changing leaves and animals fattening themselves up for months spent hiding away. He could feel the crunch of dead plants under hoof as though every step he took was meandering along the precipice of a much larger change.

He smelled Will before he saw him, though, at the time, he didn't know his name. He only knew that there was something new in the world around him, something that smelled of oats and wood, but with the lingering scent of darkness under it. He followed that scent, intoxicated immediately. He didn't realize he had approached the stream until the trickle of water on rocks caught his attention. He could almost taste the crispness of the water on his tongue, but that was nothing compared to the sight within the water's depths.

The moment Hannibal saw him, the world grew colorful, though the color was limited to the area around Will himself. He could see the blue water and golden rays of sunlight that lit dark curls. He could see the grey of the fishing rod in his hands, and the bright reds and oranges of the lure as Will withdrew it and threw it back into the water. He could see the blue of Will's shirt and the droplets of water that covered the material around his feet. And around Will, himself was a halo of yellow. He was surrounded in it, bathed in it.

He could see the cogs turning in a brilliant mind before Will's eyes ever found him.

Will Graham was beautiful.

God? Hannibal thought as he stepped closer, a twig snapping under his hoof.

That was the only explanation Hannibal could think of for the beautiful creature in front of him. He had stumbled upon a god. And when Will's eyes turned to him, those beautiful ocean-colored eyes, Hannibal was lost. Oh, he was a god. And Hannibal knew immediately that he was one worthy of worship. He was a god who gazed upon Hannibal, who smiled at him even with the darkness Hannibal could see brewing in those ocean depths. He could tell Will was much like the ocean itself, calm and alluring but dangerous and volatile. He could consume anything and everything, tear down mountains and carve landmasses.

He was a god, and like any god, he deserved to be worshipped.

And Hannibal would worship him.

Hannibal could see already that the god in front of him liked fish, so that was Hannibal's first sacrifice. An act of devotion, of worship. An act that was accepted by the god in his domain, surrounded by animals of his own choosing. Animals he doted upon. The second smile Hannibal had seen that god offer was to his dogs.

Whenever he thought of Will, his world would light up again.

He finally saw the colors of flowers; he knew the meanings behind them. His second offering of devotion was accompanied by one of those flowers, the same color as Will's eyes.

And again, the god accepted his offering.

And Hannibal was desperate to know more.

He saw the darkness behind his eyes and how acutely he understood other people. He had witnessed firsthand how the god could enter the minds of others, the ability of a god indeed.

It didn't take long for Hannibal's devotion to a god to become more. Will was beautiful, ethereal, and Hannibal wanted nothing more than to take his place beside him. The next offering wasn't just one of devotion, but an act of courtship, and with it, came the offers of Hannibal's heart.

It took too long for Hannibal's god to finally speak to him, and the moment Hannibal heard his voice, he was enchanted. His god was shy though, or at least hated eye contact, making it impossible for Hannibal to speak with him. But his voice was enough, and his request was one Hannibal could easily acquiesce to.

The next offering was only flowers, but this time he offered the carnation, a symbol of his infatuation and devotion to a god he barely knew.

But the next night came with a better gift.

Hannibal had been exploring, trying to find a new and better offering for his deity, when he came across the dog. His first instinct was for food, but it didn't take him long to remember Will's dogs and the adoration in his eyes with their presence.

And suddenly, Hannibal knew his new act of devoutness.

He knew Will would accept his gift, but he never knew that Will would give him gifts of his own. He fed him, spoke to him, let him speak in return, and eventually offered him sanctuary inside his own home. He gave Hannibal warmth and a place inside his own temple for Hannibal to sleep. And Hannibal knew better than to refuse the gifts of a god. A beautiful god, a dark god. Hannibal's god. Hannibal would worship him, and he would be grateful for whatever Will would give him. He would be content to sleep at his god's feet; he would honor the very ground he walked on.

Hannibal looked after his god when he was injured, holding him close once his god chased him. His god came for him, wanted him. And Hannibal couldn't leave his god again. Hannibal woke before Will did that morning, content to listen to his breathing. And when he stood, only able to grunt and move where Hannibal guided him, the yellow halo around him changed to pink.

Hannibal knew then. He *knew.* Will was it for him. He was the one. Hannibal loved him. He loved Will Graham. He was in love with Will Graham. And he would do whatever Will asked. He would be a friend if that's all Will needed. He would protect him, always. He would love him, even if that meant from a distance because Will deserved to be loved.

He learned new skills, making meals for Will in return for the meals Will made for him. He wanted to feed him, for him to be healthy and happy. He wanted Will to feel even an ounce of happiness Hannibal felt in his presence. His lovely god made him happy. Made him feel alive. He was alive after he saw Will. His world was light and colorful and all because of Will Graham.

And then his god, as unpredictable and wonderful as he was, offered him a place at his side, in his nest. A sacred place already occupied by a deity who was now offering him more. And Hannibal accepted.

He watched Will walk away from the bathroom in the morning, giving him more than he already had.

I love you. Hannibal told him, but he knew Will didn't hear.

He would die for his god, and as it turned out, he would kill for him as well.

Will accepted him, blood still on his skin and death coursing through his veins. Will accepted Hannibal's heart when he offered it in a different form, this time by proxy. He consumed his heart, taking it into him, where it belonged. Hannibal's heart belonged to Will, his god.

I love you. He said after following a kiss, that beautiful act of love Will had offered.

I love you. He told him again, and still Will didn't hear.

I love you. Hannibal said against dark curls in the night.

I love you. He told retreating backs and even more beautiful smiles.

Hannibal knew Will better than most. He could communicate without eye contact; he could tell Will's emotions by scent. He knew the sourness of his fear and the lightness of his happiness. And new scents came, an intoxicating sweetness that came with those beautiful kisses.

I love you. Hannibal said to Will when he looked at Hannibal's other form and accepted him.

I love you. Hannibal said in the depths of his former home as Will, gorgeous Will, looked around them in awe at a sight surpassed by the one in Hannibal's arms.

I love you. He said as the sun set in front of them.

"I love you," Will said, the words pure ecstasy to Hannibal's ears. And suddenly, Will heard his declarations. Will finally knew that Hannibal loved him and wanted him. Will *wanted* him.

Hannibal gave himself to Will fully, and when finally, *finally,* the bond snapped into place between them, the halo around Will turned red.

When the first rays of sunlight lit the room in the morning, Hannibal let the dogs out. Will was still asleep on the bed, covered in the blanket he had offered Hannibal months ago. The

dogs obeyed his silent request for silence, letting Will sleep. Hannibal eventually returned to bed, curling behind his mate, his lover, his god, his Will. In his sleep, Will moaned slightly, twisting toward Hannibal. And Hannibal obeyed his request, moving closer until he could hold his ethereal creature in his arms, where he belonged.

And when Will finally woke, when Hannibal could genuinely see him with new eyes and feel him with knew hands, Hannibal knew he had made the right choice.

Will, his Will.

And now his forever. Just as he was Will's.

Chapter End Notes

That awkward moment when you finally have sex with your supernatural boyfriend who then essentially becomes your husband and the next morning you wake up to Mads Mikkelsen.

Chapter 19

When they finally pulled apart, Will could feel tears in his eyes. He burrowed closer to Hannibal, encouraged by Hannibal's own tugging until he was tucked under Hannibal's chin. Hannibal's hands stroked his back and hair, fingers lingering around one curl then the next. Will draped his leg over Hannibal's, twining their legs together. His grip on Hannibal was almost bruising, nearly as tight as he clung to him the night before. But this was a different type of passion that drove Will to cling to Hannibal now. A passion driven by an understanding of Hannibal's devotion.

And Hannibal, beautiful Hannibal, didn't let go, keeping to his promise of holding onto Will forever.

Hannibal was the only person Will had ever sought comfort from like this. Will didn't even seek it from his own father when he was a child. But Hannibal, as usual, changed things for him. Will knew he could seek comfort in Hannibal, knew he should seek solace in Hannibal, because that comfort would never be withheld. He would never be denied, never be rejected, never be seen as something too unstable for compassion or love. Hannibal had seen him, truly seen him, from the moment they met. And in seeing Will, he had fallen for him without any expectations from Will.

Hannibal's love was pure, just as he had said with his gifts.

Will tucked his face into Hannibal's neck, needing more. He inhaled, primarily out of need, when something caught his attention. He shifted closer, no longer overwhelmed by emotion from the memories Hannibal offered him but now intrigued. Hannibal had a scent. Will pressed closer, pressing his nose to soft skin, and inhaled again, understanding for the first time why Hannibal always seemed so determined to scent him.

"My love?" Hannibal asked as Will burrowed closer.

"You have a scent," Will muttered.

Hannibal chuckled slightly, fingers stroking Will's hair. "I've always had a scent." He paused. "You just haven't been able to smell it."

"Why not?" Will asked, moving up Hannibal's neck until his nose was pressed against his pulse point.

"For my species, our scents can only be smelled by our mates."

Will nodded slightly as he inhaled again. Hannibal smelled like roses, rainfall, and the chill of a winter night. Will moved before he realized what he was doing, his mouth latching onto Hannibal's pulse point and sucking. Hannibal moaned, tilting his head to give Will better access. Hannibal's hand tightened in Will's hair, holding him close. He could taste something unique to Hannibal on his tongue, something that lit his whole body on fire with the desire to be closer. He needed closer. He needed Hannibal. Whether it was just to hold him or to be

held by him, whether it was to love him or be loved by him, Will needed Hannibal. His Hannibal.

Hannibal pushed them upright until Will was seated in his lap once more. Then he gently tugged at Will's hair, forcing him to pull away. They weren't separate for long, though, as Hannibal returned the favor, burying himself in Will's neck. Will hissed slightly, feeling the mark left behind by Hannibal's teeth, the mark that started the mating bond. Will kept his head tilted while Hannibal first inhaled then sucked on Will's neck, tasting him as Will had tasted Hannibal. At the same time, he reached for Hannibal's neck, fingers gently dancing over the mark he left on Hannibal.

Hannibal pulled away to look into Will's eyes. Then he reached for Will's hand, pressing his palm fully against the mark on his neck.

"I belong to you, Will. I have always belonged to you."

"Hannibal-" The words caught in Will's throat again, so rather than fight them out, he pushed forward, kissing Hannibal deeply.

Hannibal kissed him back, arms wrapping around Will once more, bodies grinding together. When they broke apart, Will reached for one of Hannibal's hands, dragging it forward. His human hand. Hannibal was human. Human for him.

Will pulled his hand closer, pressing his lips to the pads of Hannibal's fingers. Hannibal sucked in a breath as Will's lips trailed down to his palm then his wrist. Hannibal pressed the same hand to Will's cheek, turning his head so their lips could meet again.

When they pulled apart again, Will rested his forehead against Hannibal's. His hands gripped Hannibal's shoulders, holding him tightly as he closed his eyes. It took some concentrating, but after a moment, Will could feel the bond between them once again. He focused on it, tugging at it gently. Hannibal twitched under him, his fingernails digging into Will's hips.

I love you. Will forced the words through the bond, trying purposefully to direct them at Hannibal himself.

Hannibal gasped, his arms wrapping around Will entirely again to tug him closer until their lips met once more.

I love you. I love you. I love you. Hannibal chanted, pressing against Will as though he was trying to mold them together more so than they already had. If that were even possible.

The more Will focused on the bond, the more he could feel Hannibal like he had the night before. He could feel him again, between his thighs, under his fingertips. He could feel Hannibal down to the tips of his hair and into his toes. He could feel his heart where it jumped in his chest, reaching for Will's. Will could feel his own heart reaching back, their hearts beating in tandem. Will knew, with every inch of his being, that an identical beat of Hannibal's heart mimicked every heartbeat of his.

He continued to prod, feeling again the very essence of Hannibal and where his life touched Will's. It was a deep feeling, one that clogged Will's throat and made his head spin.

Hannibal moaned, his fingers digging into Will's back.

Will leaned against Hannibal, letting Hannibal bear most of his weight. Hannibal leaned back against Will in return, and Will realized that this, this one simple act, was the purest form of love. Leaning against another and holding them up in return, letting someone bear his weight, the weight of everything on him, and bearing Hannibal's existence in return was pure love. This was the purest emotion he had ever experienced, the supernova that electrified his heart. His heart belonged to Hannibal.

The only thing that drew Will back to reality was the rumbling in his stomach. Hannibal smiled and pulled away slightly.

"We should clean ourselves and then eat."

"I'm not sure my legs work," Will answered, remembering the soreness when he woke.

"Fortunately, I have a solution to that."

That was all the warning Will had before Hannibal's grip tightened, and he pushed from the bed, standing with Will in his arms.

Will grinned, looking above Hannibal's head at the ceiling. "You're standing."

Hannibal grinned in return, and Will's breath caught at the sight of his fangs. His teeth looked more human now, but it appeared that even his human form couldn't entirely erase who he was. And that made Will feel like he was falling in love all over again. He knew now what it was that he had felt before, the feelings of falling in love with Hannibal. He didn't think it would ever stop. There would be something new every day, and Will would continue to fall a little more in love with him.

Hannibal carried him into the bathroom, toward the shower. The shower that he could now stand it.

"It is certainly one of the advantages of this form," Hannibal said as he let Will down gently.

"And what are the others?" Will asked, knowing Hannibal had already thought ahead.

Hannibal tugged the shower curtain and turned on the water, letting it heat up. Then he turned back to Will and dragged him closer, wrapping him in his arms.

"The ability to flaunt you in front of your friends." *And former prospective mate.*

Hannibal didn't say the last word aloud, but Will heard them anyway. Honestly, he would enjoy showing Hannibal off to the people he worked with, partially to show that he was real and for a slightly more vindictive reason. He shoved that thought aside, though, not wanting anyone else, physically or mentally, invading the world they had built around each other in the last day.

"It would be nice not to have to sneak off for lunch," Will said as Hannibal pulled him into the shower. "We could have lunch in my office or at a restaurant or-" Will trailed off as Hannibal tugged him closer.

"It appears you want to flaunt me as much as I want to flaunt you," Hannibal muttered before he tugged them both under the water.

"I just want you," Will answered under the water.

"I know."

Together, they began to clean each other off as Will admired his human form under the spray of the water. He couldn't stop himself from touching Hannibal, either to clean him or just to feel Hannibal under his fingertips. Hannibal seemed just as determined to touch Will, his hands lingering. When they were clean, though, neither reached to turn off the water; instead, they stayed under it, bodies pressing together once again.

Will's fingers followed the curve of Hannibal's spine as Hannibal's lips pressed to his shoulder, sucking off the water that pooled at his clavicle. Will pressed closer, kissing the edge of Hannibal's shoulder.

"Will," Hannibal whispered, pressing closer.

Will's hands lingered for longer, feeling muscles flex under Hannibal's movements. Hannibal's body pressed closer until their groins brushed, and Will felt how hard he was. Will's own body reacted instantly, arousal barreling through him like a freight train.

He bucked his hips against Hannibal's, their bodies grinding.

"Hannibal, I don't think-"

"Hush, my love," Hannibal whispered, turning his head to tug Will's earlobe between his teeth.

Will whimpered before Hannibal began to kiss down his body, lips forging a trail that left Will's skin tingling in his wake.

Hannibal dropped to his knees in front of Will, lips pressed against Will's hips. Will could feel the water that bounced off Hannibal's skin and felt the heat of Hannibal's breath as he pressed open-mouthed kisses again his hips. Will reached for him, his hand gripping wet hair.

"I wanted to do this yesterday, but I didn't want to hurt you," Hannibal told him before he dipped his head, taking the tip of Will's cock in his mouth.

Then, without warning, he swallowed Will to the root, making Will's whole body arch and his grip on Hannibal tighten. Hannibal wasted no time hollowing his cheeks and sucking, leaving Will scrambling for purchase against his shoulders. Hannibal bobbed his head slowly, drawing his lips down Will's cock and then pressing forward again, burying Will's cock in his throat. Will groaned at the feeling, nails digging into soft flesh.

Hannibal's fingers gripped his hips, not to hold him in place, but just to hold on, a need Will understood. Hannibal alternated between short bobs of his head and long deep sucks that had Will feeling like his soul was about to leave his body.

He couldn't do much more than cling to Hannibal, his other hand pressed against the shower wall to hold himself upright. Hannibal's mouth was ecstasy, and Will could do nothing more than embrace it and him, letting his head fall back against the wall. Hannibal's hand soon joined his mouth before he moved to pepper kisses along Will's thighs. Then he returned to his cock, lips wrapping around it once again, his tongue dragging along the underside.

Will bucked his hips gently, feeling Hannibal moan around him as he did.

The water seemed to grow cold compared to the heat that rose within him, spurred by Hannibal.

Will's toes curled against the floor of the shower, his legs shaking slightly as pleasure roared through him, spurred by Hannibal's constant attention on his cock.

When he felt close, Will began to tug at Hannibal, drawing him upward with a protest. Hannibal stood as he wanted, though, until Will was able to wrap his arms around him. Will wasted no time turning them, pinning Hannibal to the wall.

He was ravenous as he kissed Hannibal, pressing their bodies together. Hannibal welcomed his ravenousness, letting Will nearly attack him to kiss him. Hannibal's fingers dug into his shoulder blades. Will reached between them, his hand wrapping around Hannibal's cock. Hannibal bucked into his hand, and Will didn't need to be encouraged twice. He began to stroke him, his movements in time with the desperation of his kisses.

Hannibal's grip was unrelenting on him, even as Will tried to shift his weight downward. Hannibal moved with him until the two of them found themselves on the floor of the shower.

"Hannibal-" Will tried, but Hannibal wasn't having it. His lips collided with Will as he rolled them over, pinning Will under him. The spray of the water danced over his face as Hannibal pressed against him, hips rolling.

Will barely managed to reach between them, wrapping his hand around Hannibal's cock again in some attempt to give him even an ounce of the pleasure Hannibal had given him. Hannibal reached between them as well, wrapping his hand around Will's cock before taking them both in hand.

Their fingers overlapped as Will moaned, their hands working in tandem on their cocks. The heat of Hannibal pressed against him was just as electrifying as his mouth, and Will wanted nothing more than to come undone completely. Hannibal kissed him deeply, and Will wrapped his free arm around their bodies.

"Oh god, Hannibal," Will moaned against his lips.

"Will," Hannibal whispered before dipping his head to kiss him once again.

Will bucked his hips, thrusting into their combined grips, hearing Hannibal groan in response.

Will could feel Hannibal's pleasure building as if it was his own. He could feel it roaring through him, feel it causing his body to tense and his grip to tighten around them.

"Hannibal, I'm-"

"I know," Hannibal whispered. "Me too."

Their hands slid up and down their cocks until Will's pleasure overwhelmed him, and suddenly everything turned white. He knew Hannibal came at the same time, he could feel his pleasure precipice and his body shake where he was over Will.

Will wrapped his arms and legs around Hannibal the moment he was able, ignoring the spray of water that bounced into his eyes. It didn't matter; only Hannibal mattered. Hannibal, who was in his arms.

The two of them were breathing heavily as they held each other, and Will could hear another litany of 'I love yous' being chanted by Hannibal through their bond. Will tried to return them, but he didn't know if Hannibal heard him. He thought Hannibal heard him, though, as his grip on Will tightened with every word.

It took the two of them working in tandem to peel themselves off the shower floor and out of the shower. They dried each other off, both of them taking extra care with the act. Will found himself admiring Hannibal's body, even more, kissing marks left on his back from Will's nails. Hannibal moaned with every kiss, reaching for Will to tug his hands around him, their fingers twisting together.

Hannibal ultimately ended up in a pair of sweatpants that Will barely wore, and the sight of them on him made Will's arousal sore all over again. He was famished when it came to Hannibal, aching and never satisfied. He would always want more. One more touch, one more kiss, one more glance at his muscled torso, and one more press of his body. He wanted another moment where he was trapped in those amber eyes and another touch of clawed hands. He wanted to feel antlers under his fingertips and feathers between his fingers. He wanted more, and no amount of Hannibal would ever be enough.

They ate breakfast together, the two of them preparing it side by side before crowding next to each other at the dining room table. Will offered Hannibal a bite from his own fork, remembering the first time he had been in such a position and Hannibal's gentleness when he ate the oatmeal off Will's spoon. Now, Hannibal fed him in return, his eyes lingering on Will's lips.

After breakfast, the two of them returned to the living room as Will's phone buzzed, demanding his attention.

"What is it?" Hannibal asked as Will glanced at the screen.

Will looked out the window, seeing snow fall on the other side, painting the whole world white.

"Blizzard warning," Will said. "Looks like we're stuck inside."

Hannibal grinned.

Chapter 20

The two of them spent the rest of the day blizzard proofing the house. Or well, Will did. Hannibal spent most of the day admiring his mate, watching the roll of his muscles under his skin, the way the light caught his eyes, the way he moved. Hannibal couldn't help but stare at him, especially now that he would see the world around him in just as much color as Will always was. But all it did for Hannibal was make Will seem to shine brighter. Every ray of light, every shadow of snowfall, everything about the world around them seemed to culminate at Will, everything in the world pointing to Will. His Will.

Hannibal found himself reaching for Will every opportunity he had, fingers brushing over his skin. Will always allowed his touch, never shying away and quite often pressing into it. Hannibal's hands brushed over shoulders as he lifted what he called a generator, feeling the muscles flex. His fingers brushed over Will's biceps as he cooked their newest meal and the dogs' food, wanting to do so while they still had power. He admired the way Will's body looked as the two of them dragged furniture around, setting up a space for them to rest near the fireplace should the power go out. He admired the way Will stood out in a world of white, as they let the dogs out before the snow threatened to consume them.

It turned out Will's foresight was excellent as the moment they had finished preparing themselves, food made, and dogs satisfied, the whole house went dark. Some light managed to filter in through the storm outside, enough that Hannibal could still see his god as he moved through the house, grabbing pillows and blankets off the bed to deposit near the fireplace. Then Will offered him a hand, reaching for Hannibal. Hannibal couldn't resist the urge to reach back, and before he knew it, Will tugged him down onto the floor in front of the fireplace.

The dogs were curled into their bed; the whole household barricaded behind the couch and chairs that he and Will reorganized. Will reasoned that they would help keep the heat in where they would huddle for the rest of the day. Hannibal enjoyed listening to whatever Will had to say, even if it was something as simple as why he turned on the facets to let water drip. Now, Will arranged the blankets and pillows around them, giving them enough padding even though there was a carpet between them and the floor. He arranged some of the pillows and cushions from chairs to block the spaces under the couch and chairs to insulate them.

Hannibal smiled at him once he was done, welcoming Will back into his arms.

Will settled against him easily, relaxed in Hannibal's grip. Hannibal knew well that Will relaxing in his arms was a gift in and of itself. Will was always tense around others; he hated physical contact. Hannibal had seen that time and time again when Will was around people at crime scenes. Hannibal learned what crime scenes were from Will, and while it took him a moment to understand, he knew that Will felt like he could embrace his darkness at them.

That had changed too, now. Hannibal could feel Will's darkness under his skin, no longer caged. He was freer with Hannibal, no longer as confined as he once was. Hannibal knew he

could be cruel, vindictive, and spiteful even if he wanted to. Yet with Hannibal, he was calm, collected, and the side of Will that was most hidden, his gentleness, was on full display.

Like any god, Will could choose who he gave his affections to. And Will offered his affections to Hannibal.

Hannibal held his god in his arms, feeling Will fidget above him. Hannibal leaned into Will's space, burying his face in his neck. He inhaled, smelling the same familiar scent associated with Will himself. The same scent that comforted Hannibal in the night and lingered on his skin in the morning. Will sighed against him, leaning the weight of his body against Hannibal. Hannibal accepted him immediately, clinging to him.

How beautiful was he? Hannibal thought.

Hannibal tilted his head, kissing the edge of Will's jaw. Will shivered, and Hannibal continued, following the curve of it. Will's grip tightened on him, a hand moving up his back to grip his hair.

Hannibal pulled away to meet Will's eyes. He couldn't explain the comfort that came from seeing those eyes, how the darkness around them did not dull them. Will's eyes shown in the muted light around them, their brilliant ocean color heating Hannibal to the core.

"We should get a fire going," Will said, extracting himself from Hannibal's grasp.

Hannibal watched as Will moved toward the fireplace, his eyes gladly feasting on every movement. Hannibal reached for him as he started the fire, his hand caressing Will's back as he replaced the grate in front of the fire.

Will paused in front of the flames for a moment, and Hannibal watched the firelight flicker around him. The oranges and reds of the firelight blended with the halo around Will, the halo of the mating bond. Until Will, he hadn't seen color, but that was common for his species. No one ever saw color until they found people meaningful for them. Friends, family. But for Hannibal, he only saw color when he saw Will. Will was truly the light of his life, and his human eyes allowed Hannibal to feast on all of it.

Will moved back toward him, wrapping his arms around Hannibal to hold him closer.

Hannibal smiled at Will again before he drew them both to the ground, tucking Will against him. Will curled closer, sighing slightly as Hannibal wrapped his arms around him. Will burrowed under Hannibal's chin, seemingly most comfortable against Hannibal's shoulder.

"So, what do you want to do with the rest of our day?" Will asked, pressing closer.

"I have a few ideas," Hannibal murmured.

He could feel his mate's lovely smile against his throat as Will reached for his hand, their fingers lacing. Then he pulled his hand back, twisting their fingers around each other before lacing their hands together again. Hannibal pulled their hands closer, kissing Will's knuckles gently.

"Hannibal," Will whispered, sighing again against his throat.

Hannibal knew that feeling, the one that made Will sigh against him. He squeezed Will's hand, feeling Will shiver. Then Hannibal let go of Will's hand, letting his fingers slide up Will's arm. Will reached for him, his fingers pressing against his back. Hannibal knew that if something afflicted him tomorrow and he lost his memory, nothing could ever take away the feeling of Will's hands gripping him in the throes of passion, the memory of Will against him, and the brilliance of his eyes. He could lose sight, taste, and touch, yet he would never be able to forget the feast Will constantly offered for his senses, one Hannibal indulged in.

Will pressed a soft kiss to Hannibal's throat, and Hannibal swallowed thickly, the feeling igniting a fire within him as bright as the one that heated the space around them. Hannibal shifted to press a kiss to Will's forehead. Will tilted his head up more, moving up the blankets so they could kiss. Hannibal deepened their kiss, tasting Will on his tongue. Will shifted closer, his grip on Hannibal increasing.

Hannibal drew Will against him more until they were plastered against each other.

"Touch me, Hannibal," Will whispered against his lips, spurring his hands into motion. Hannibal let his fingers trail over Will's back before lifting his leg. Rather than hook it over his body, though, he moved one of his own legs between Will's, letting Will's leg rest atop his. Will groaned and bucked against him. Hannibal bit back his arousal, wanting nothing more than to bury himself against Will.

"I love you," Hannibal whispered against Will's lips.

"I love you too," Will whispered back before capturing Hannibal's lips in another kiss.

Hannibal's hand trailed lower, slipping under Will's shirt. Will's back arched under his touch, pressing the two of them together more.

Will pulled off his shirt after a moment, pressing their bare chests together. The feeling made Hannibal's heart attempt to leap from his chest, and he knew exactly where it would go if it managed to escape the confines of his ribcage.

Hannibal pressed forward more before rolling them.

"Hannibal," Will said, though this wasn't the whispered need just to say his name. Will wanted something. Hannibal pulled back from his position over Will, looking at him. "I don't think-"

Hannibal knew exactly what he was going to say, and before Will could finish his sentence, Hannibal shifted his legs, settling a knee on either side of Will's hips.

"Oh," Will said, his hands falling to Hannibal's thighs as he looked at him. "Are you sure?"

Hannibal smiled and bent to kiss him again, lingering for a moment against his lips. "I'm sure," Hannibal answered. "Do you want me?"

"Oh god, yes."

Hannibal should have remembered the predator under him, the lovely god that was like any other, before he pounced. He didn't, though, and therefore he had no warning when Will suddenly flipped them, pinning Hannibal to the floor under him. Will was on him instantly, their lips colliding. Hannibal's heart ached at Will's eagerness, the hunger he could feel in the grip of his hands and the press of his body. Will was a force of nature himself, one that consumed Hannibal whole. Hannibal let himself be consumed by his perfect mate, acquiescing to every request, even the silent ones.

Before he knew it, they were bare to each other with Will over him, seemingly ready to consume him.

Hannibal gripped him, tugging Will down to him. Will ground against him, their cocks brushing as he tried to press closer. For a moment, Hannibal wondered if Will was trying to bury himself inside Hannibal. Hannibal gripped him tightly, wanting nothing more than to have Will as close as possible.

Will kissed down his body, lips lingering over his heart before he continued downward. Hannibal knew what he was after, but it still set him on fire when Will took his cock in his mouth. Hannibal groaned, hands fisting in blankets and Will's curls as Will bobbed his head, sucking on Hannibal's cock like a starved man. And maybe he was starved. Hannibal could sense the hunger within him, and it only ever reared its head with two things. The first time Hannibal had seen Will's hunger, it followed Hannibal's kill of the man who attacked them. Will's hunger was a dark one in that moment. But Will's hunger with Hannibal, while still as pure, was a different kind of hunger.

Hannibal felt that same hunger himself, but his was easier to satisfy. The mere sight of Will could fill his desire, but Will offered him so much more.

Will continued to suck at his cock before pulling off with a pop. Then he continued downward, kissing Hannibal's thighs before shouldering them apart. When his tongue flicked over Hannibal's entrance, he thought he had come undone right then. It was apparent, from the feeling, that Will was inexperienced with his motions and hesitant, but Hannibal was in heaven regardless.

Had he known Will was comfortable with such things, he certainly wouldn't have stopped with Will's cock earlier. He decided to file the thought away for later, knowing he would have more than enough opportunities to indulge his wants, to have his taste, and to have Will over and over.

Will moved back to his cock, sucking again with enthusiasm. Hannibal gripped his hair again with one hand while the other reached for the discarded clothing Will had given him, tugging a bottle from one of the pockets.

Will grinned when he realized what Hannibal had, crawling back up his body to kiss him before taking the bottle in hand.

He was gentle, at first, as he worked a finger into Hannibal's body. But Hannibal knew he wouldn't be able to keep himself in check for long, and soon he was working in a second and

third finger, stretching Hannibal open though without the same gentleness as before. Hannibal could handle it, he had expected it, and he knew the reason for Will's eagerness.

Hannibal didn't want gentle. He wanted Will, and while he could be gentle, Will wasn't inherently a gentle person.

Will pulled his fingers from Hannibal's body before pouring more lube on his cock. Then he discarded the bottle haphazardly before covering Hannibal's body with his own, their lips colliding. Hannibal rearranged himself as Will pushed closer until their bodies aligned. Hannibal's vision went white for a moment as Will pushed into him, not from pain but from pure ecstasy as Will entered him.

He was in heaven. He died and went to heaven. His god had decided that was it, that this earthly existence was enough for both of them, and took him away. Whatever domain they were in now belonged to the deity over him, the god who had fallen in love with him. His mate.

Will cried out when he pressed into Hannibal fully, his body collapsing against him. Hannibal held him, keeping Will against him. Will panted against his shoulder, his body shaking in Hannibal's arms.

"Hannibal," Will whimpered, pressing closer.

"I have you," Hannibal answered, turning to press a kiss to his forehead. *And I won't let you go.*

Will turned to kiss him, rolling his hips as he did.

Hannibal moaned against Will's lips. Will gripped him, burying himself in Hannibal. Hannibal gathered Will against him, holding him tightly. Will only withdrew far enough before thrusting into him, the movement harsh enough that it forced the breath from Hannibal's lungs.

Yes. He moaned, unable to force himself to speak like Will.

Will, though, seemed to take it as a request to destroy him as soon he drew back more and thrust into Hannibal's body roughly. Hannibal could only hold on for dear life as Will's movements sped and for the first time, Hannibal understood how much Will was holding himself back. Even in his lovemaking, Will was brutal, but Hannibal could feel that same ravenous hunger underneath it. Will's brutality wasn't for the sake of brutality, it was because every withdraw from Hannibal's body had him desperate to return.

Hannibal could feel Will's desperation through their bond. He could feel Will's need, and this need was directly purposefully at Hannibal.

He could almost hear Will's body as it cried out for more, while Will himself tucked Hannibal closer. He drew up his legs, making Hannibal's own shift until he wrapped them around Will's waist. Will had his hands wrapped around Hannibal's shoulders, clinging to him and holding him in place for every thrust.

The new angle made it so that every inward push of Will's cock brushed against Hannibal's prostate, and that feeling was enough to drive him mad. That, accompanied by the feeling over Will over him, claiming him, his possessive thrusting, and his even more demanding mouth, had Hannibal losing the last of his control.

He could feel the moment it slipped and as soon as it did, his true form took over. Hannibal felt his antlers extend above his head, felt his feet twist back into his hooves, felt the nails on his hands grow until they were claws once more.

Will pulled back after a moment, his eyes tracing over Hannibal's body. His gaze darkened and suddenly his mouth was on Hannibal's again.

His thrusting became wild, unrestrained, and every one battered Hannibal's prostate. Hannibal could only hold on as Will forcibly dragged them both to their pleasure, leaving no room for reprieve for either of them.

"Hannibal. Hannibal." *Hannibal.* Will repeated his name over and over, saying it like a prayer. *I need you. I love you.*

I love you. Hannibal echoed over and over. He didn't even know if he was clinging to Will anymore. He only knew the feeling of Will against him and the overwhelming tidal wave of his pleasure.

Hannibal came, Will's name on his lips and his body calling out for Will's. Will whimpered and buried himself against Hannibal. He offered a few more brutal trusts before he stilled, the heat of his orgasm warming Hannibal's insides.

Will collapsed on top of him, the aftershocks of his orgasm making his body twitch against Hannibal's. Hannibal barely managed to come down from his own orgasm as he wrapped his arms around Will, focusing on trying to shift back into his human form. Will, however, didn't seem to care much which form he was in as he pressed against Hannibal, not yet pulling free from his body.

The firelight lit Will's face beautifully, casting shadows over his lips and cheeks as he lay on Hannibal's chest, shaking slightly. Hannibal held his mate close, searching through the bond for how Will felt.

It appeared he was as content as a house cat with no intention to move ever again. Hannibal didn't mind that; he would gladly be the alter for his god to lounge on as he stroked soft curls.

Will eventually pulled back slightly, slipping from Hannibal's body before he pillowed on his chest again. Hannibal held him, watching the firelight dance in his eyes.

"What are you thinking, my love?"

Will shrugged and burrowed closer. Around them, the house began to hum again as lights flickered on. Hannibal didn't dare look away from Will to see what had become of the storm outside, but he had a feeling it had eased. Though that didn't mean it was gone, and he hoped it wasn't. He would take any excuse he could find to stay here with his mate, to hold him and

make love to him and share those precious smiles with him before he had to return to the outside world.

"Does your species celebrate holidays?"

Hannibal searched Will's face. "We celebrate birthdays."

"Oh," Will said.

"Please tell me, my darling."

Will shifted closer and inhaled. Then he opened his eyes again, his gaze meeting Hannibal's. "My job has this stupid Christmas party every year. I never go, never wanted to go. But maybe-" He paused, and Hannibal waited patiently. "I'd like to go." He murmured. "With you."

"You don't really want to go," Hannibal said. He knew Will better than that.

"No," Will admitted. "But I'd like to take you."

"I'll go wherever you want me."

Will grinned, then pressed closer again.

"And what if I want you over me again?" Hannibal opened his mouth to answer, but Will continued. "Or in me?"

Oh god, yes.

Will grinned as Hannibal pressed against him again, stealing a kiss.

They had each other again and again, as the storm rose and died, as the power flickered on and off, as the night fell and consumed them all, but no more than Hannibal consumed Will and was consumed in return. By the time the fire died, Hannibal's mate was asleep on his chest, his god breathing softly in the silent night.

Chapter 21

It took two days for the blizzard to die down. In that time, Will and Hannibal had each other again and again, consuming one another wholly. By the end of the first day, the power returned and stayed, heating the whole house beyond the fire in the little nest they had made together. The next day, the storm slowed, and Will could finally see the top of his car again. Not that he truly cared about his car. He wanted nothing more than to stay in their house with Hannibal; the two of them burrowed against each other. He was grateful, though, when they could move back to the bed, and Will could hold Hannibal against his chest. It had been strangely comfortable, lying on the floor with Hannibal, but his lover insisted that he pillow against him rather than lie on the floor. Will knew Hannibal saw his comfort as paramount, so it was a relief when he could drag them both into their bed and hold Hannibal to his chest.

Will was grateful for the storm as it seemed not only to keep him and Hannibal in their home but the serial killers as well. Will hadn't heard from Jack since the storm started, and even as it cleared, his phone was silent. He was grateful for it, for the chance to stay with Hannibal uninterrupted.

On the third day, when the storm subsided, and the roads were cleared, Will coaxed Hannibal from the house. It was purely for selfish reasons that he dragged Hannibal with him. Both knew that Hannibal needed clothing for his human form and that Will's clothes wouldn't suffice. Will knew he could easily find clothes for Hannibal on his own, but he reasoned to himself and Hannibal that seeing them on would be better. It wasn't as though Hannibal protested, though, letting Will drag him wherever he saw fit.

It turned out that watching Hannibal try on clothes did things to Will. Hannibal quickly developed a preference for fancier clothing, becoming partial to suits and ties. Will watched with amusement as Hannibal tried on suit after suit, modeling them for Will. Eventually, Will managed to talk him into trying on other clothes as well, and that was far more torturous for Will than the suits had been. Will could barely hand the first pair of jeans Hannibal tried on, and by the second pair, Will nearly came undone. Will nearly tackled Hannibal into the dressing room, determined to suck him off right there.

In the end, they managed to agree on a few suits along with some jeans, dress pants, and a few button-up shirts. Hannibal seemed rather content with their results from the day. On the other hand, Will had a death grip on the wheel as he drove them home, far too determined to arrive home so he could take apart Hannibal like a Christmas present. He knew Hannibal could sense it, their bond allowing Hannibal to sense Will's arousal and Will to sense Hannibal's amusement.

Will's hands tightened on the steering wheel, his knuckles nearly white.

Hannibal reached for him, his hand gently pressing against Will's thigh.

"What are you thinking about?" Hannibal asked, fingers dancing.

Will gritted his teeth for a moment before taking a calming breath. "I think you're confusing which head is thinking."

Hannibal chuckled. "You and I both know you can think with both heads at once."

Will smiled and reached for Hannibal's hand, lacing their fingers together. "I was thinking about the Christmas party?"

"Are you regretting your invitation?" Hannibal asked.

"Not one bit," Will assured him. "I only want to go because of you."

"Then what is bothering you?"

Will sighed. "I was just thinking about the questions we'll be asked. Where did we meet? How long have we been together? What's your last name? Where are you from?"

Hannibal squeezed Will's hand. "You could tell them the truth." He paused. "Tell them we met while you were fishing. I thought you were a god-" He cut himself off. "I still believe that."

Will sucked in a breath before his grip on Hannibal tightened. "I've often thought the same about you."

"I suppose we could agree to mutual worship." Hannibal offered, and Will could feel his smile.

"I suppose," Will echoed, raising their linked hands to press a kiss to the back of Hannibal's.

They were silent for a moment before Will spoke again. "What about your last name?"

Hannibal was silent for a moment. "My species doesn't do last names like yours." Will could feel the weight of his gaze. "What about Graham?"

Will's heart backflipped in his chest, and his hand tightened on Hannibal's. "As much as I would love that, and I would. I only told them about you a few weeks ago. They would ask more questions if we arrived with the same last name."

"Mates of your species often have the same last name, right?"

Will nodded. "They do."

Hannibal paused then Will felt the weight of his gaze again. "We could do that if you wanted. Your species mating ceremony."

Will nearly lost control of the car at Hannibal's words. He managed to keep them from driving off the road before he pulled over to the side. Hannibal opened his mouth to ask Will what happened when Will reached over the center console, dragging Hannibal into a kiss. Hannibal let himself be moved, succumbing to Will's onslaught easily. Will tugged Hannibal

closer, the center console digging into his thigh. Hannibal reached for him, his hand cupping Will's cheek as they pulled apart for air.

Hannibal leaned forward, pressing his forehead against Will's as they breathed heavily.

"Before you," Will began, closing his eyes to keep himself from backing out of the confession he was about to make. "I never wanted marriage or a mate. But with you, I find I want to tie myself to you in every way possible."

"I understand, my love," Hannibal murmured in response. "I want nothing more than to know you're mine, whether is by my species mating bond or yours." Will could feel him smirk. "Preferably by both."

Will tilted his head to kiss Hannibal again before drawing back. He laced his hand with Hannibal's again, setting their joined hands on Hannibal's thigh before pulling back onto the road. Home couldn't come soon enough. Or at least an exit ramp to a very heavily wooded area.

"If not Graham, for now," Hannibal began. "Then what?"

Will shrugged, letting last names begin to run through his mind. He couldn't help but put those names next to his, mentally testing how those names would sound when hyphenated. Before Hannibal, the future was daunting and lonely. But with Hannibal, he didn't dread what was to come anymore. When he looked to the future now, it was filled with images of Hannibal and a name they could share together. Will used to hate thinking ahead, knowing that he would have 30, 40, or 50 years more of the life he was living, and the idea crushed him enough as it was. But with Hannibal, even though he knew their lives would be much longer than that, he wasn't afraid. His whole future was filled with Hannibal, and that made it easier.

Hannibal made everything easier.

"Lecter," Will said as they pulled into the driveway. Hannibal cocked his head, a gesture Will was grateful stayed between his human and true form. "Hannibal Lecter."

"Hannibal Lecter," Hannibal mimicked, testing the name on his tongue.

Will stood from the car, walking toward the trunk, meeting Hannibal, who came from the other side.

"Why Lecter?" He asked, dragging Will closer before he could grab the bags from their adventure.

Will shrugged. "I don't know. It sounds noble, regal." He paused. "And slightly menacing."

"Are you hoping to chase people away with my name?" Hannibal asked, amused.

"Maybe," Will answered. "I think most would prefer that over me chasing them away myself."

"I think I would enjoy that sight," Hannibal whispered, leaning closer to Will.

"I know," Will answered as Hannibal gently pushed through the mental image of Will snapping and snarling, a mate protecting his own. Will continued. "Lecter-Graham. Eventually."

"Will and Hannibal Lecter-Graham," Hannibal murmured. "A name just for us." He paused. "I like it."

Then he stepped back, dropping his arms from around Will before offering his hand. Will could see humor in his eyes as he took Hannibal's offered hand. "Hannibal Lecter," He said, as though introducing himself.

"Hello, Hannibal Lecter," Will answered.

Hannibal grinned, stepping back into Will's space to wrap his arms around him. Will tucked himself into Hannibal's grasp, burying his face in his lover's neck. His lover, his mate, his Hannibal, who was slowly becoming more and more a part of Will's world.

After a moment, Hannibal pulled back, pressing a kiss against Will's forehead. Then he reached for some of the bags in the trunk, holding Will with the other arm. Will reached for the others, taking them in hand before shutting the trunk, the two of them walking toward their house with one arm looped around the other. The dogs whined at the door as they neared and quickly barreled outside once the door was open, though they did stop to sniff the bags briefly.

The two of them set the bags inside as Will looked over Hannibal's body, taking in the sight of his new clothing while in a familiar environment. New clothes, a new body, a new name. Hannibal had done everything for Will, even to the point he was willing to give up his own species for Will. Will never asked him to, and in fact, he didn't want him to. He wanted Hannibal exactly as he was; he had fallen in love with Hannibal without him being human.

"Hannibal," Will whispered, still staring at him. Hannibal neared him, face twisting into concern as he neared.

"My love?" Hannibal reached for him to hold him gently. "What's wrong, my darling? You were happy. What changed?"

Will shook his head. "I'm still happy," He whispered, pressing his forehead against Hannibal's. "You have done so much for me, became human for me. I just-" He broke off. "You said I could become like you too. Change into your species."

"Yes," Hannibal confirmed.

"I want to. I want you to be able to be yourself and to be like you," Will said, the words falling from his mouth like a tidal wave.

"My darling," Hannibal breathed, gently stroking Will's cheek. "I would love nothing more than to see you like me." Will opened his mouth to say more, but Hannibal silenced him,

pressing a kiss to his lips. "I think perhaps you might find some freedom." He said when he pulled away. "But not yet, my love."

"Hannibal," Will began in protest.

"Will," Hannibal said, silencing him again. "The transition for the first time will be painful for you. It was easier for me to become a human than it will be for you to be like me. And I will not have you making that change while in a confined space." Hannibal reached for him, cupping his face with both hands. "It is still winter. We will spend it here, where we can stay warm, where I can hold you and make love to you. And when spring comes, I will take you somewhere open, and you can experience the change somewhere you belong. Somewhere free and open. Without a cage around you."

"Hannibal," Will whispered, except this time it was just for the sake of saying Hannibal's name.

"Trust me," Hannibal whispered in return.

"I trust you," Will answered, leaning closer until they were pressed together again. Hannibal held him, one hand gently stroking over Will's back. "You've had this planned for a while, haven't you?" Will asked eventually.

"I knew you would want to experience the change the mating bond allowed and that I wouldn't be able to fight you on it. So, I thought ahead."

"Do you want me to?" Will asked.

"Yes," Hannibal answered, and Will could feel the honesty of it. "But I will not have you hurt to do so."

"Does it hurt you, staying inside?" Will asked, his voice quiet.

"No," Hannibal assured him. "I'm here because I want to be. I want to be with you, wherever that is. Inside, outside, in bed, or in the grass. I want you."

Will turned his head to kiss Hannibal's neck, seeing the mark made the night they formed the mating bond. Hannibal sucked in a breath as Will kissed the mark, feeling Hannibal shiver in his arms.

"I love you," Will whispered.

"I love you too," Hannibal answered, kissing Will's temple. "Now come, my love. We should let the dogs in and make lunch." He leaned toward Will conspiratorially. "Then maybe I could try on those jeans for you again."

Will's mouth dropped open, and he nodded vigorously, seeing Hannibal's smile and feeling the surge of love and awe that rushed through their bond.

Chapter 22

Hannibal stood in front of the mirror in the bathroom. His reflection greeted him, a human face and human body, clothed in a red suit. Hannibal smoothed down his tie in the mirror as he looked over his reflection more. He knew part of being human meant wearing clothing, as humans did. But clothing was restrictive and limiting, decreasing his range of motion. He couldn't react well enough in a suit; he couldn't hunt or fight. But he didn't need to hunt or fight while in this form. Behind the walls of the house, he was safe, and more importantly, so was Will. The only exception to that had been the attack by the killer Will was hunting, come to hunt his hunter. Hannibal had killed for Will that night, his skin covered in blood. Now, his skin, a different skin, was covered by fabric instead, though the color was similar. Hannibal looked in the mirror, seeing a suit the same color as freshly spilled blood.

Hannibal had learned a lot in the time that led up to the Christmas party. He learned about the holiday itself, what alcohol was, and how to dance. The dancing was his favorite part, once he understood what he was doing. It took him a moment to figure out what he was doing, learning how to maneuver on feet rather than hooves. He stepped on Will's toes a time or two in the process, but Will was a patient teacher. Hannibal knew that his patience was reserved for him as he had seen a few vicious emails directed toward students. With Hannibal, however, Will was kind and forgiving, never once complaining when Hannibal's human feet took over more space than he thought they should. Hannibal caught on to dancing quickly, though, and soon he was spinning with Will around the room, the dogs dancing at their feet.

Will had made several changes to the house for Hannibal as Christmas neared. Hannibal had to admit he was surprised when Will came home one day with the tree on his car and lights in tow, though he had sensed that Will had a surprise for him before he arrived. The tree took over a corner of their main living space, the lights bathing the whole room in a particular feeling that Hannibal couldn't put a name to. Will had decorated the porch railing too, twisting lights around it that glowed softly in the dark. Hannibal spent his nights with his mate asleep in his arms while staring at the tree and the string of lights out the window, knowing Will had put them there for him. Will didn't celebrate holidays for one reason or another, and he probably wouldn't have if not for Hannibal.

Hannibal smiled as he adjusted his tie, twisting and turning himself in the mirror, looking for wrinkles and the way the suit curved. He didn't care about how it looked for appearance's sake; he wanted to look perfect for Will. Because Will deserved perfection, in Hannibal's mind.

Once he was satisfied, he turned toward the bathroom door and opened it slowly.

Hannibal's breath caught as he looked at the ethereal being across the room. Will stood with his hands behind his back. He wore a silver suit that accentuated his ocean-colored eyes. His hair was tamed, shorter than before. Hannibal had hated Will's haircut when he first came home with it, not because Will looked worse, but because he thought for a moment he would lose Will's curls. Those beloved curls were still there, though, Hannibal found out, much to

his pleasure. He spent more than a few nights carding his fingers through those curls, long or short.

Will lit up when he entered the room, his lips parting slightly. Hannibal could see his pleasure in the darkening of his eyes and could feel it through their bond.

He neared his mate, who was gazing at him adoringly until he was close enough to drag Will into his arms. Hannibal pressed a kiss to his lips, gentle at first, then deeper as the kiss dragged on. Will reached for him, one arm wrapping around Hannibal. They broke apart after a moment, and Will pressed their foreheads together.

"You look beautiful, my love," Hannibal whispered.

He heard Will exhale. "You look-" He paused. "Perfect. You're perfect."

Hannibal preened, reaching to wrap his arms around Will.

Will shifted then withdrew his other arm from behind his back, weaving it between them. Hannibal felt him shift for more space before something soft pressed against his upper lip. He knew what it was immediately, and soon Will dragged the petal downward, caressing his lower lip and then his chin as Hannibal had done to him more than once. After a moment, they pulled apart, but barely. Just enough that Hannibal could see the flower Will offered him.

It was a rose, a white rose.

Hannibal sucked in a breath as he reached for it, wrapping his fingers around the stem. He raised the flower to his nose, his mind running a gauntlet as he thought of similar flowers he once gave Will. Like the carnations, the rose meant purity. But it was more than that. The white rose also meant everlasting love.

Will gently tugged the flower from his fingers before pinning it to the lapel of Hannibal's suit jacket. Will smoothed down the jacket once he was done, his hands gently trailing over Hannibal's chest.

"My love," Hannibal whispered.

"I love you," Will said. "I never thought I'd love someone the way I love you."

"I love you too," Hannibal whispered. "You're everything to me. Forever."

They leaned forward at the same time, their lips meeting in the space between them. Will's hands slid up Hannibal's chest, gripping his shoulders through the fabric of his suit. They pulled back after a moment, both still clinging to the other. Then Will leaned in again, pressing another, deeper kiss to Hannibal's lips. Hannibal kissed him back, holding him tighter, afraid that if he let him go, his beautiful god would vanish.

"We could just stay here," Will muttered. "Make something ridiculous for dinner, watch a movie-"

"Make love?" Hannibal finished.

"Yes," Will confirmed, stepping closer still.

Hannibal kissed him again, lingering for a moment before pulling away. "We should go. I want to meet your friends. To show them that you belong to me and only me."

Will smiled. "I think most people will be too jealous of me to notice when I show up with you at my side."

"I think you mean they will be jealous of me," Hannibal whispered, reaching to stroke Will's cheek.

Will chuckled. "We should go otherwise we'll stand here all night debating which of us is luckier."

Hannibal smiled and nodded. Will twisted himself, so he was next to Hannibal before offering him his arm. Hannibal looped his own through, their arms linking. Together, they left the house, only parting when they reached the car.

The drive to the Christmas party was a tense one, mostly for Will. It was light and bright for Hannibal as he watched out the window, admiring the decorations on the houses they passed. Hannibal had seen those decorations before, but this was the first time he was seeing them in color. Before, they had been black and white, and while he knew there was light there, he couldn't see it fully. Now, he watched the way the lights danced over the snow; reds, greens, blues, and silvers setting the world ablaze in a way Hannibal had never seen before.

Will gripped the steering wheel tightly the whole time; Hannibal could feel the tension in his muscles even in the passenger's seat. Will calmed, though, when Hannibal reached over to touch him, his body relaxing under Hannibal's fingertips. Hannibal kept one hand on Will for the duration of the drive, massaging his thigh or neck to loosen him when he began to tense again. Will drove them to a building Hannibal didn't recognize, telling him that sometimes his job would rent spaces for holiday or retirement parties. He was stalling, Hannibal knew, as he stayed tense once the car was parked, glaring at the building in front of him as though he could make it disappear.

Hannibal reached for him, gently pressing a hand to his cheek. Will relaxed under his touch, and soon they were exiting the car and meeting at the front of it. Hannibal offered his arm to Will as Will had done before. Will looped his arm through Hannibal's, his grip tight. Together they walked toward the building, but Hannibal dragged them to a stop before they could enter.

"If you don't want to do this, I would understand," Hannibal murmured. "I don't want you to be uncomfortable."

"I want to do this for you. To show you that I want to share my life with you," Will answered.

"I already know that, my love. I don't need a party to prove it."

"I know," Will answered. "But I want to. For you."

Hannibal smiled and pulled Will closer for a kiss on the forehead.

Together, they ventured inside. Hannibal could hear the roar of the party as they neared it, but more importantly, he could feel Will begin to shield himself. Hannibal had understood quickly that Will saw more than most. He felt things, saw things, understood things that no one else ever could. And he knew that even now, Will would still be exposed to the entirety of the party, even if he had anchored himself to Hannibal as he admitted one night after a rather passionate lovemaking.

They paused at the door of the party, both taking in the space and people around them. Cut-out snowflakes hung from the ceilings, and the walls were decorated with soft, white lights. Each of the tables had a silver table cloth with some Christmas theme in the center, like Santa, reindeer, or snowman. Will had told him all about the various Christmas items, the two of them even sitting down to watch movies, an activity Hannibal found he enjoyed because Will pressed close to him the whole time. Around them, people chattered and laughed, the roar of the party almost overwhelming between them and the music.

Will tugged them into the room, ignoring everyone around them in favor of dragging Hannibal toward the bar. Hannibal knew Will wouldn't be able to tolerate the night without alcohol to dull his senses slightly, so it came as no surprise when Will quickly ordered whiskey. Hannibal had grown partial to whiskey himself, though he thought that was Will's influence. He welcomed it gladly.

"Will!" A voice called, and Hannibal turned to see a woman approaching them with a broad smile.

"Hello Beverly," Will greeted, plastering on a neutral face to cover his grimace. "Hannibal, this is Beverly. Beverly, this is my...Hannibal."

"Hello Hannibal," Beverly greeted enthusiastically, sticking a hand out for Hannibal to shake. "It's so nice to meet you finally. Will's never talked about someone who wasn't a serial killer, and then suddenly there you were."

Hannibal smiled, shaking Beverly's hand. "Will is a private person."

"Private is an understatement," Beverly teased.

Will glared into his whiskey.

"Privacy isn't a bad thing," Hannibal said, releasing Will's arm to wrap his own around Will's body. "I'm glad that Will finds me a secret worth keeping."

"Well, you two are adorable," Beverly said, and Will glared harder. "Don't worry. I told everyone to leave you alone for the night. I know you don't want to be asked a ton of questions."

Will's glare let up at that. "Thank you, Beverly."

She grinned. "Well, I'm going to go find Price and Zeller."

She left before either could say anything more.

"I see why she’s your favorite," Hannibal murmured as Will took another drink of whiskey.

"Those two are Price and Zeller." Hannibal followed Will's gaze to see the two people Beverly approached, already talking as she neared them. "Over there, that's my boss, Jack, and his wife, Bella." Hannibal followed Will's gaze again before Will tensed. Hannibal looked once more, only to find the woman he had once seen at Will's house hugging him. "Alana."

Hannibal turned toward Will as he downed the rest of his whiskey.

"Will," A voice said, soft but obviously critical.

Will and Hannibal turned at the same time to see the same woman now at their side, having crossed the room swiftly.

"Hello, Alana," Will greeted tersely.

"Alana Bloom," She said, turning to Hannibal and offering her hand. "Will hasn't said much about you."

"Hannibal Lecter," He answered, shaking her hand gently before tightening his arm around Will. "I know."

"I'm surprised you came, Will. I know you don't like parties," Alana said, her critical gaze moving back to Will.

Will shrugged.

"Will," Hannibal said, dragging his attention away. "Would you like to dance?"

Will grinned, his gratefulness evident through the bond. "Yes."

Hannibal smiled. "Excuse us," He said to Alana, dragging Will away before she could answer.

He pulled Will toward the other couples already dancing, losing themselves amongst the crowd.

"I don't think your friend likes me much," Hannibal said as he wrapped one arm around Will, the other hand lacing with Will's.

"I'm so sorry," Will muttered. "I forgot she was going to be here."

Hannibal smiled at him softly. "No need for you to apologize, my love. I'm glad she could see that you are mine."

"I am yours," Will answered with a smile, moving closer.

Hannibal smiled again before tucking Will closer, the two of them dancing among the crowd.

He took the opportunity to listen to the party around them, hearing Will's heart as it hammered in his chest, the music as it echoed off the walls, and the conversations around them.

"-never thought I'd see Will smile," Beverly said somewhere off to the side.

"It's weird," Another voice said. "Like seeing your grandma on a date. Vaguely disturbing, and you'll never get the image out of your head."

"It's not that weird," Beverly protested. "And besides, Will deserves to be happy."

Hannibal turned his attention back toward Will, feeling him relaxed now in his arms.

"If they kiss, I'm going to puke," The voice said again.

"Your friends seem surprised that you have a partner," Hannibal murmured.

Will hmphed but didn't say anything else.

Hannibal spun Will, letting him move away before tugging him back with force, making their bodies collide. Will's eyes widened when they pressed together, arousal brewing briefly in their ocean depths. Hannibal leaned forward, pressing a soft kiss against familiar lips. Will kissed him back, letting of Hannibal's hand to cup his cheek, kissing him back. Hannibal heard a soft click somewhere off to the side, directed at them, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered except for Will.

Will was less tense when they pulled apart, letting some of his weight lean against Hannibal as they danced.

Eventually, dinner was served, and Hannibal found himself at the same table as Will and everyone he had pointed out to Hannibal before.

"So, how did you two meet?" Alana asked, the same critical tone in her voice.

Told you so. Will muttered.

"We met while I was fishing," He answered aloud.

"No offense, but you don't strike me as a fisherman," The man Will called Zeller said to Hannibal.

"Looks can be deceiving," Hannibal answered over the edge of his wine glass.

Especially when you look human.

Hannibal smirked into his glass at Will's comment.

"How long have you been together?" Beverly asked, apparently unable to keep herself from asking.

Predictable.

"A few months," Will said, his outward tone not at all betraying the snark Hannibal heard through the bond.

"But I can't remember a time before Will," Hannibal said, turning toward Will.

Will smiled at him, his face softening as he looked at Hannibal like he was the only person in the world.

"You two seem-" Alana began, voice tense. "Happy."

"We are," Hannibal answered quickly before backtracking to keep from putting words in Will's mouth. "I am."

"I am too," Will told him, even though he knew the rest of the table could hear.

Hannibal smiled again, raising their joined hands from below the table to kiss the back of Will's.

The questions continued, and soon, Hannibal could tell Will was growing tired of them. He managed to escape to the dance floor again, Will in tow, but soon it became evident the evening was wearing on him.

"I had a lovely time tonight," Hannibal murmured to Will's curls.

Will snorted. "I doubt that. I wasn't exactly a ray of sunshine the whole time."

Hannibal smiled. "I don't care if you're a ray of sunshine or a dark cloud. You are mine, and I accept everything that comes with that. And I know your mood is not because of me but because this is taxing on you." Hannibal gestured around them at the still raging party.

Will sighed and nodded, burying his face in Hannibal's neck as if to hide.

"Will," Hannibal murmured, still swaying to the music with Will against him. They weren't dancing, they were swaying, but even that was precious to Hannibal.

"Hmm?" Will asked.

"Let's go home."

Hannibal heard the way Will's heart jumped at the word home and the way his mind latched onto the word because Hannibal said it.

"Ok," Will said softly. "Let's go home."

Chapter 23

Some Days Ago

Alana thought she was being a good friend when she pulled into the driveway to visit Will. The holidays were nearing, and she knew that Will didn't celebrate them, didn't have family to see, and generally spent most of his time alone. Sometimes it worried her how well Will could fit the profile of a serial killer, and since his stability was often in question, she sometimes wondered if one crime scene would push him over the rails. Alana didn't think Will would kill on purpose, but she knew there was a chance he could lose himself in the mind of a serial killer, and that would be it. Will Graham would be gone, and someone else would take his place. So, she thought she was doing the right thing by visiting him. She was trying to keep him human.

At first, Alana thought she had pulled up to the wrong house when she saw the lights on the porch and the lit-up Christmas tree glowing from the window. The house in front of her was light and bright, nothing at all like the house she normally approached when she saw Will.

She parked her car behind Will's and checked again that she had the right address. She had driven here so many times, there was no way she was wrong, yet she felt compelled to check anyway. Will had a habit of absorbing the personalities of those around him, and as such, he often seemed to be the center of gravity in any place, the whole world coming to a point at Will Graham. It was the same here in his home as sometimes it seemed like everything pointed to him and the barriers of his house did very little to block it out.

Yet as she turned off the lights on her car, she saw that she was, in fact, in the right place.

Will moved in front of the window, a wide grin on his face, his hair flying in different directions even though it was shorter. His shirt was untucked and sitting at an awkward angle as though someone had shifted it. One arm was extended beyond the window toward something else.

Or rather, someone else.

Will was tugged back away from the window, but after a moment, he reappeared. This time, though, someone else was in his arms. It was another man, a little taller than Will. Alana couldn't see much of the man, though she could see how intimately he and Will were intertwined. Their foreheads were pressed together, and he had one hand pressed to Will's lower back. His other hand was clasped with Will's, the two of them turning slightly near the tree. It took her a moment to realize they were dancing, both of them grinning at each other in what little space was between them.

Will seemed happy, wrapped in the arms of a man Alana had never seen before. He was still grinning from what Alana could tell, pressed so close to the other man that it was apparent there was some intimate relationship there.

Alana evaluated Will more, remembering the last crime scene she had seen him at. He looked stable then and even more stable now as he danced slowly in his living room. Will had said the person he met was a man. Was this Will's new lover?

She searched Will's face, seeing the face of someone who was happy, healthy, and well-rounded on the other side of the glass window.

Was that all he needed? Was that what he had been asking for with all his romantic advances? Had he really just needed someone to help hold him steady? Not a psychiatrist but a partner? Someone he could lean on intimately and wholly without the same boundaries of a professional relationship. Had she really been that blind? Had she failed Will so completely? Had he really been reaching, desperate for stability, and she rejected him again and again?

Had she truly failed her friend that much?

Alana couldn't bring herself to go to the door. She couldn't interrupt them that way, taking Will away from his partner like that.

Alana kept the lights off as she turned her car around from the house, trying not to alert Will that she was there. She knew he would be at the Christmas party. She would evaluate his partner then. Maybe she could see if he was truly worth Will anchoring himself to him.

She would find out soon enough.

Will nearly sighed with relief when he saw their house. Hannibal had been as content as he had seemed all night, whether it was at the party or leaving it. He knew part of that content was because of Will. Will had never been around someone like that before, someone who accepted him so fully and was just content to be by his side, whether that was at a party or in their house alone.

Will reached for Hannibal's hand as they left the car, their fingers lacing together as they walked toward the house. Hannibal held Will's hand firmly, a steadying grip that anchored Will after the tediousness of the night. He knew it would have been worse without Hannibal. Hannibal made the night bearable, whereas before, it would have been murderous. Hannibal shielded Will from most of the night, dragging Will onto the dance floor whenever it became evident that Will was becoming overwhelmed. All those minds in the room, thoughts that ran rampant, gazes that betrayed the meanings behind them that they didn't outwardly express, all took their toll on Will.

Standing in a lecture hall was bad enough for Will, but at least with his students, he could talk at them rather than to them. But at a party, with all eyes on him because he never left his house for things like that or because he had someone new on his arm, Will thought he could collapse under the mental pressure. But Hannibal held him upright, put himself between the others and him, and then swooped him off his feet to take him home.

And now they were home, dogs waiting and the house light and bright for the first time since Will moved in.

They let the dogs out first, both waiting outside for them to finish then moving out of the way to let them flood back in. Hannibal waited patiently through all of it, his eyes flitting to Will often. Will hummed when they entered the warm house, still somewhat dark even though they had left the tree on to greet them when they returned. He kicked off his shoes first then heard Hannibal do the same as he reached for the buttons on his jacket.

His back was to Hannibal, but he still knew when he approached and knew he was behind Will before he ever felt the press of hands.

Hannibal's hands stopped Will's, moving them to the side. Then he reached for the buttons on Will's jacket, undoing them slowly. His breath was hot on Will's neck, looking over his shoulder to see what he was doing.

"Do you know what I've learned from all those Christmas movies?" Hannibal whispered to him.

"What?" Will asked, sounding breathless even to himself.

Hannibal finished unbuttoning his jacket before his finger slid up Will's chest toward his collar. Will felt when his fingers wrapped around the collar of the jacket, slowly pulling it off Will's shoulders. Will could feel the press of the fabric as Hannibal drew the jacket down slowly. It took an eternity for the edges of the sleeves to reach Will's hands, and Hannibal discarded the jacket with much more haste than he withdrew it from Will.

"I learned that unwrapping presents is most of the fun," He whispered in Will's ear before leaning closer to nip at his earlobe.

Will shuddered as Hannibal reached for his shirt, slowly untucking it. He undid Will's belt afterward, then popped the button on Will's pants. Will shuddered, his hands reaching for Hannibal's wrists, fingers digging into the skin just below the fabric of his suit jacket on his wrists.

Hannibal's hands dove into Will's pants, slipping under his briefs. He managed to somehow avoid Will's rapidly hardening cock as his fingers slid lower then drew back up to Will's pelvis, making him shiver again.

Hannibal pressed gently against his pelvis before letting up, his hands brushing against Will's chest until he reached his tie. The tie he removed quicker than the jacket, but his fingers lingered on the buttons as he undid them one by one. The more skin exposed to air made Will shiver as Hannibal opened his shirt, the buttons coming undone one after another.

Before Hannibal could tug Will's shirt off him, Will turned in his arms to face him. He could see Hannibal's smile in the dark and leaned forward to kiss it, hoping he could capture that specific smile on his lips. He wanted to hold it forever, let it warm him the same way the very sight of it did.

Will reached for Hannibal's jacket, undoing it faster than Hannibal undid his, but he didn't rush. Hannibal's hands had slid under the back of Will's shirt, his fingers pressing against Will's lower back but let up when Will pushed his jacket off his shoulders. Unlike Hannibal,

who tossed Will's jacket onto the nearby chair, Will just let Hannibal's fall to the floor. He quickly loosened and discarded Hannibal's tie before pressing closer, letting Hannibal's hand fall on him again.

Hannibal leaned forward, pressing closer for a kiss, but Will withdrew. Hannibal cocked his head slightly, but Will smiled. Hannibal leaned in again, and Will leaned in to meet him, letting their lips brush lightly before Will pulled back again, smiling once more.

Hannibal nearly growled, his hands pressing against Will's back.

Will reached between them to undo the buttons of Hannibal's shirt, fingers trailing over his chest hair whenever he could. Hannibal groaned and reached for his collar, tugging it aside to press a kiss to Will's now bare shoulder.

Will shuddered again before he grasped Hannibal's shirt and tugged. Hannibal had no choice but to let him go for a moment as Will ripped his shirt from his, dropping it off to the side. Before Will could grasp him again, Hannibal took hold of Will's shirt, dragging it from his body in the same slow manner he removed Will's jacket. Then that was gone, and they stepped closer to each other again, bare chests brushing. Will reached for Hannibal, fingers twisting in the hair at the back of Hannibal's neck. Hannibal's hands slid over his bare back, pressing Will closer.

Their lips met finally in a passionate kiss that had Will's grip tightening.

Hannibal's hands slipped lower, dipping back into Will's pants. Will felt his fingers move under his briefs again until Hannibal's hands gripped his ass, a cheek in each hand. Then he pulled, forcing Will up onto his toes. Hannibal quickly took advantage of Will's new height, ravaging Will's mouth.

Will reached between them, undoing Hannibal's pants and shoving them down, hearing the clothing fall to the floor with a muted slap. Hannibal hummed, and soon Will was stepping out of his own pants.

Hannibal tugged Will closer, the two of them shuffling backward until they fell onto the bed, a heap of limbs.

Will kissed him, arms and legs automatically wrapping around Hannibal.

After a moment, Hannibal disentangled himself then crawled down Will's body, peppering kisses the whole way. Will could see a twinkle in his eye as he reached Will's pelvis before he dipped his head, teeth latching onto Will's briefs. He tugged them down slowly, hands smoothing down Will's thighs and calves until he tugged Will's briefs free from him. Will thought he was going to lose it right there. He dragged Hannibal back up the moment he could, scrambling to push down his briefs until they were bare to each other.

Their bodies pressed close as Will kissed him, hands roaming and grasping.

Hannibal groaned, gripping Will's hips to grind them together.

Will pulled back slightly, the urge to see Hannibal overwhelming. Hannibal smiled at him softly, tilting his head to kiss Will's nose.

Will groaned. After a moment, Hannibal kissed his way down Will's body, stopping at odd places to kiss him, his ribs, above his belly button, the jut of his hips. Will knew what was coming when Hannibal's lips wrapped around his cock, but that didn't stop his gasp at the velvet heat of Hannibal's mouth. Will's hands moved to Hannibal's hair, quickly messing it up from how he had set it for the evening. He knew Hannibal didn't care, especially when Will's fingers tugged lightly at the strands.

Hannibal sucked at Will's cock slowly, not at all in a rush.

After a while, when Will was nearly shaking under Hannibal's attention, he pulled off then lifted Will's legs, continuing to kiss lower. Will adjusted himself, feeling Hannibal's hands grip on him tighten. Hannibal's tongue flicked over his hole, and Will tensed automatically for a second before relaxing. He wasn't unfamiliar with this feeling, but every time Will reacted the same. Hannibal licked at his hole, pressing into him with the tip of his tongue. Will gripped Hannibal's hair tighter, groaning as pleasure Hannibal pressed closer.

They continued like that for a while, too, with Hannibal slowly licking him open and Will holding onto some part of him for dear life.

Soon, Hannibal was crawling back up his body. He reached for the lube as he settled next to Will tugging him onto his side and pulling Will's leg over his own. Will reached for Hannibal, kissing him slowly. Hannibal's fingers worked Will open while they kissed, pleasure sinking into Will's bones. It wasn't the same roaring pleasure he often experienced. This was warm but deep, intimate. He'd experienced this before too, but the first time had been the night he and Hannibal first had sex. Or was it made love? Will had experienced sex before, and it was nothing like this. Nothing comfortable and gentle and passionate like this.

This was making love, he decided. Hannibal was right.

Once Hannibal was satisfied that Will was prepared, he reached for the lube again, but Will stole it from him. He poured some onto his hand, slowly lubing Hannibal's cock.

After that, they shifted closer together. Will hitched his knee up higher on Hannibal, his leg hooking around his hip. Hannibal pushed into him slowly, sending a ring of pleasure up Will's body until he felt like it was going to explode out of the tips of his hair.

"Hannibal," He whispered as Hannibal began to roll his hips, pressing against every part of Will.

They kissed again, slow and deep, as Will shifted his hips in time with Hannibal.

After a moment, Will rolled them until he was over Hannibal. Hannibal's hands move automatically to Will's hips, guiding him as he rocked slowly on Hannibal's cock. Will balanced himself on Hannibal's chest, feeling his heartbeat under his fingertips.

Will's movements were slow at first, the same as Hannibal's had been, before he stopped, looking at Hannibal under him.

"What is it, my love?" Hannibal asked.

"I want-" Will paused. "Your true form."

Hannibal smiled softly, and as Will watched, he began to change. His fingernails grew into claws that covered more of Will's hips where he held him. His eyes became white, and Will could see fangs growing from between his parted lips. His antlers stretched above his head, pressing closer to the wall. His whole body shifted until it was no longer his familiar human one but the equally familiar form of his own species. The form Will had known the longest, the form Hannibal had been in when Will fell in love with him.

Will smiled and bent himself, pressing a kiss to Hannibal's lips.

How lucky am I to have someone who loves me for the real me. Hannibal told him, arms holding Will tightly.

Will smiled, nuzzling against Hannibal's cheek for a moment as he rolled his hips. Hannibal thrust upward in time with his movements, the two of them slowly rocking in the bed. Will rested his head on Hannibal's shoulder as they continued to rock together, neither of them moving very far from the other. Hannibal nearly purred under him, his arms keeping Will pinned above him.

After a moment, Will wrestled away, pushing himself back up. The position gave him better leverage to ride Hannibal, and soon he began to speed his movements. Hannibal gripped his hips, thrusting up with every drop of Will's hips, forcing them back together. Will groaned, letting his head fall back.

Hannibal lunged suddenly, lifting himself upward. Will opened his eyes to see antlers stretching above their heads as Hannibal's arms wrapped around him again. He grinned at the sight and wondered briefly if there was a way for Hannibal to only partially shift between his forms. He had done it with his eyes once, making Will wonder how Hannibal's human form would look with antlers. He knew he should wonder if he had odd kinks, thinking about Hannibal's human form with antlers while riding his cock, but he couldn't help but think that his major kink was Hannibal himself.

Will let his head fall forward again, his forehead pressing against Hannibal's. He wrapped his arms around him, holding Hannibal as tightly as Hannibal held him.

He could feel Hannibal's pleasure through their bond, and that feeling went straight to his already aching cock. Hannibal hummed, tugging at the bond as Will felt for it, as though he was trying to pull Will closer mentally too.

Will leaned more against Hannibal, resting his head on Hannibal's shoulder, grinding against him more than riding now. Hannibal turned his head, pressing a kiss to Will's neck right where he had once bit to form the mating bond.

The more Will thought about it, the more he realized mate was the best word for Hannibal. Nothing else felt quite as intimate. Lover, boyfriend, partner, husband. They all seemed to lack something. But mate seemed to suggest a deeper intimacy, one that fit their relationship better.

Hannibal gently nipped at Will's neck, then bit harder, making Will moan. He knew with Hannibal's fangs, he drew blood, but Will didn't care. It wasn't like it was the first time. Hannibal pulled back eventually, and Will twisted his own head, pressing a kiss to Hannibal's neck then offering a bite of his own in return.

The moment a drop of Hannibal's blood touched his tongue, the mating bond twitched. It seemed as though the rope tying his heart to Hannibal's thickened until it was its own blood vessel, sharing blood between them in their already unified heartbeats.

Will pulled back slightly, and suddenly, he saw himself through Hannibal's eyes. He could see the outline of his body from the lights on the tree, the pleasured look in his eyes, and the swelling of his lips from their shared kisses.

He knew Hannibal saw through his eyes as well; he could feel it in the way he gasped slightly.

Their lips crashed together again, and Will saw through his own eyes once more.

Hannibal tilted them before Will knew what was happening, pressing Will back onto the bed again except in the opposite direction. The position meant that Hannibal wasn't at risk of banging his antlers against the wall, and soon their slow movements increased. Hannibal pounded into him harshly, holding Will tightly the whole time to make sure he didn't move up the bed with his movements.

Will groaned, nails digging into Hannibal's back, legs gripping him for dear life. Hannibal seemed determined to fuck that very life from Will's body, and soon Will was coming with a silent scream, his head falling back and lips open.

Hannibal snarled and buried himself in Will more before spilling inside him.

Will groaned and clung to Hannibal, the two of them slowly rocking through the aftershocks of their orgasms. Both of them were breathing heavily, clinging to one another as they came down, bodies still pressed close together. Will could feel Hannibal's heartbeat both in his own chest and in his own chest, as though Hannibal's heart had finally leaped free from him.

"Was that- was that supposed to happen?" Will asked.

No. Hannibal answered. They were silent for a moment, still clinging to one another. *I've never heard of a mating bond becoming stronger like that.*

"What does that mean?"

You are a god. Hannibal answered, sounding certain.

Will laughed and turned his head, capturing Hannibal's lips. Hannibal kissed him back, and Will felt him shifting in his arms.

"I love you," Hannibal whispered against his lips.

"I love you too," Will whispered back, reaching up to stroke Hannibal's cheekbones.

"I always knew you were special," Hannibal told him. "Now I have confirmation."

Will laughed. "You're ridiculous."

Hannibal smiled. "No. Just correct."

Will sighed. "Just hold me."

"Forever," Hannibal promised.

Eventually, Will drifted off to sleep in Hannibal's arms, the two of them still clinging to each other with their heads at the foot of the bed.

Chapter 24

Hannibal and Will woke on Christmas morning as they often did, in each other's arms. Hannibal woke with Will facing him, his arms wrapped around Hannibal and his face buried in his throat. Hannibal shifted slightly, meaning to dip his head to bury his nose in Will's curls, but Will whined, tilting his head upward, eyes still closed, but lips puckered. Hannibal smiled, bending to kiss his mate, who hummed the moment their lips touched. He knew Will still didn't open his eyes as they kissed, but the hand that wasn't pinned under Hannibal's body reached for him, his fingers tangling in the hair at the back of his head.

Will still tasted like him from the night before, Hannibal's blood still lingering on his tongue.

Hannibal thought back to the night before and the feeling of the bond strengthening. That wasn't supposed to happen. He knew of mates who tried to strengthen the bond and failed. No one who had ever tried succeeded. So, why had they?

Maybe it was because they weren't trying to strengthen the bond. Maybe it was because their desire was earnest, not for the bond but for each other. Hannibal hadn't been thinking of the bond at all when he bit Will. It was a spur of the moment, a desire to be closer, and a need that couldn't truly be filled. And he knew that Will hadn't been thinking of the bond either; he had just been thinking of Hannibal. Maybe that was what caused it. Or maybe it was Will's empathy. Will could live in the mind of another person, and maybe that made it possible for them to be closer. As the last of Will's walls went down and the last of Hannibal's accompanying them, walls built from need, it allowed the bond to become stronger.

It was already a strong bond, one that seemed to surpass most mating bonds Hannibal knew of. Their love had been strong before the bond, but it had grown stronger as they accepted it. Maybe that did it too.

Or maybe it was some combination. Or maybe it was something else entirely.

Hannibal found that he was strangely content not to know. All he needed to know was that Will loved him, and he loved Will in return.

His Will was casually pressing closer as though Hannibal would be oblivious to his arousal and wandering hands.

Hannibal willingly succumbed to Will's wishes, and it didn't take long for them to drive each other to their orgasms.

Will collapsed on top of him, finally opening his eyes for the first time that morning.

"Merry Christmas," Will muttered, his voice raw from the night before and the morning.

"Merry Christmas," Hannibal answered, his eyes wandering over Will's face where he hovered above him. "And may I say it's a wonderful present to wake up to such a gift."

Hannibal reached up to stroke Will's cheek, and Will leaned into his hand. Hannibal smiled, amazed as he often was at the way Will was so open with him compared to everyone else. The Will he saw was not the same Will who interacted with the rest of the world. His Will was open, receptive, loving, gentle. And Hannibal was always the same way with his mate.

Will pressed closer to him, laying his head on Hannibal's shoulder. "I have another present for you." He told him.

"Will," Hannibal breathed, amazed at the god on his chest. "You didn't need to."

"I know," Will answered. "It's nothing big but-" He trailed off, and Hannibal could feel his uncertainty.

"I'm sure it's perfect, whatever it is."

Will smiled then nuzzled his neck before pushing off him. He stood, stretching, before offering a hand to Hannibal. He took Will's hand immediately, and together the two ventured toward the bathroom, cleaning themselves up from the night and the morning.

By the time they were done, Will looked like he was about to fall asleep on Hannibal's shoulder again, but he stayed awake anyway, letting the dogs out and starting the coffee. Hannibal gently moved Will aside as he began breakfast, determined to make their meal for the morning. Will watched him from the edge of the counter, the same place Hannibal had always watched Will. They ate together once breakfast was done, opting to eat in bed, something they never did. But it allowed the two of them to rest shoulder to shoulder and soon watch the movie that Will started.

Hannibal knew, through their bond, that Will didn't often play movies, but he did for Hannibal, giving him more opportunities to experience the color he only now saw. Hannibal tucked Will into his side during every movie, stroking his arm or back just because he needed to touch.

Today, the movie was the least of their concerns as soon, Hannibal found the two of them kissing, tongues tangling, and lips meeting over and over. Will had turned them both onto their sides, and Hannibal quickly reached for him, letting Will pillow his head on Hannibal's arm. The other hand was busy stroking over Will's body, finding soft, familiar skin or beautiful curls which fell between his fingers.

On the bedside table, Will's phone buzzed, and Will nearly threw it across the room, his hand quickly returning to cup Hannibal's cheek.

After a while, Hannibal didn't know how long, Will pulled away to bury himself under Hannibal's chin. Hannibal gently stroked his arm, their hands finding each other's now and then to twist their fingers together.

Once the first movie finished, Will pulled away, gesturing toward the tree with the jut of his chin. Hannibal's eyes peeled away, and soon, Will was standing. Hannibal followed him toward the tree, and Will turned the lights on, bathing the space around them. Then, he reached into the tree and withdrew a small package, one he handed to Hannibal without

looking at him. Hannibal accepted the package, wondering when and how Will managed to wrap it and hide it from him. But his Will was cunning; he knew he shouldn't be surprised.

He turned the package over in his hands, looking at the careful wrapping done by a steady hand. He could tell that Will had wrapped and rewrapped the present, determined to make it perfect. So, as he began to undo the wrapping, Hannibal did it carefully, wary of ruining Will's hard work.

Inside the wrapping was a small box about the size of Hannibal's hand. He set the wrapping aside and gently tugged the box open. The first thing to greet him was a piece of fabric, carefully protecting something inside. He pulled the fabric aside, and his heart melted.

Inside was an all-black stag made out of some kind of wood. The stag had carefully carved feathers on its hide, not up to its head like Hannibal's other form, but that didn't matter.

"I saw it when I was on a case, and I thought of you. I bought it immediately and knew it was just for you," Will muttered, looking everywhere but at Hannibal.

Hannibal reached for him, dropping the box to one side and grabbing Will, the stag statuette still in his other hand. He tugged Will closer, their lips colliding as his heart ran circles in his chest, determined to escape to Will.

"I love it," Hannibal whispered. "I love you. I love you." *I love you.*

Will hummed, barely able to respond under Hannibal's onslaught. But Hannibal knew; he always knew.

I love you. Will told him as Hannibal dragged them both to bed, carefully setting the stag on the bedside table before kissing Will again, tearing away the clothing he had put on following their shower.

Will hummed again, letting Hannibal tear at his clothing before he ripped Hannibal's away, letting their bare bodies brush again.

"If this is how you react to your Christmas present, I can't wait to see what you do at New Year's."

"What are you planning for New Year's?" Hannibal asked, forcing himself away to say the word before he began to mouth at Will's neck.

Will turned his head to give him access, his hand gently stroking Hannibal's hair.

"You'll see."

As it turned out, New Year's couldn't come fast enough, and Hannibal spent the next week trying to secretly search the house for whatever present Will had hidden from him. He knew it would be too much, whatever it was, but he wanted to know anyway. He wanted to know what his darling had put away, hiding it so that he could surprise him in a week.

Will never gave anything away, watching Hannibal with cunning eyes that said he knew Hannibal had been searching but wouldn't find what he was after.

Hannibal tried everything he could think of to pry it out of Will either via seduction or hoping he would slip up mentally and reveal it, but Will was determined to keep it a secret.

He succeeded, much to Hannibal's slight annoyance but mostly amusement. Hannibal knew his mate had hidden his present for a reason, and while he was desperately curious, he waited until New Year's Eve to find out.

Will had done an excellent job distracting him, though, his lips and tongue alone enough to do the job, but Will threw in the added bonus of his own body, knowing it would distract Hannibal sufficiently that he wouldn't even be searching mentally.

When New Year's Eve finally came, Hannibal spent the whole day looking for any changes in the house or Will's posture. But Will, his lovely, cunning, beautiful Will, managed to hold his secret close.

That night, after dinner and a movie, Will turned the TV to a countdown. It was still a couple of hours before midnight, the time where one year would end, and the other would begin. Hannibal found that he was saddened to see the year go. It was the year he had met Will. The year he had fallen in love with Will. The year he mated with Will. His Will.

But he knew that the new year would come with more of Will, and years to come would still have him. He was Hannibal's forever, no matter the year. Hannibal couldn't help but think that not even death could tear them apart.

Mates with strong bonds often died within weeks or months of each other, the heartbreak too strong to keep them apart. He hoped the myths of death were true and that soon afterward, they would be reunited again. He hoped that Will never truly died. He hoped that he would grow tired of his earthly existence one day and take Hannibal away to his kingdom, where Hannibal could stay at his side for eternity.

Either way, he would be comfortable with his eternity, whether it was an eternity at the side of a god or an eternity of a mortal life. All he needed was Will.

They made it to just a few minutes before the countdown began when Will crawled off the bed, kissing Hannibal deeply before he ventured to the kitchen. Hannibal heard a cork pop and the pour of a bubbly liquid before Will returned, handing him a glass of champagne. Will had explained when he bought it that it was a celebratory drink, one usually reserved for holidays or weddings. Hannibal accepted the glass and gently tapped it to Will's before taking a small sip, savoring the flavor of the champagne on his tongue. Will adjusted again before settling next to Hannibal, one hand holding the glass and the other laced with Hannibal's.

Together, they watched as a giant glass ball came to life. Even from their bed, Hannibal could feel the energy of the crowd they were watching and the hope that radiated from them for something better to come with the dawn of a new year.

Hannibal had his own wishes of the year to come, hoping that it meant keeping Will by his side longer, that the cases he went on were fewer, and that every morning, he woke with his mate by his side whether it was here in their bed or somewhere new.

Will watched him out of the corner of his eye, he could feel the weight of his gaze, but he didn't mind. He liked Will watching him.

The crowd grew in excitement, and as Hannibal watched, a clock flashed to life and began to count down.

Something about it felt enamoring, exciting. He felt like everything teetered on those seconds as they began to flash, one after another.

20.

Will squeezed his hand, and Hannibal's grip on him tightened, needing to hold Will closer.

19.

Hannibal let go of Will's hand in favor of wrapping his arm around Will's shoulders.

18.

Will weaved his arm behind Hannibal's back, his free hand carefully balancing his glass on his leg.

17.

Hannibal's heart began to beat rapidly in his chest.

16.

Will's gaze turned to him fully.

15.

Hannibal's gaze was glued to the TV, those bright second numbers flashing before his eyes, reds, and yellows lighting up his vision and the space around them.

14.

Will shifted closer still until his hip was pressed right against Hannibal's.

13.

Hannibal clung to his mate, his whole body tensing.

12.

Will leaned closer, his gaze still on the side of Hannibal's face.

11.

Hannibal moved to tangle his leg with Will's needing as much contact as possible between them. This wasn't enough. Nothing would ever be enough.

10.

Something was nearing. Hannibal could feel it. It was like he was being hunted, even though the only other worthy predator in the room was glued to his side.

9.

Will shifted, and Hannibal gripped him tighter. Will couldn't leave him, not now.

8.

The crowd chanted along as did something in Hannibal's heart, counting down the seconds one by one, tick by tick.

7.

Hannibal thought he might break the glass in his hand with how tightly he was holding it.

6.

Will shifted again, this time turning so he was resting on one hip more than sitting, his body plastered against Hannibal's.

5.

Hannibal's breath caught in his chest.

4.

The whole world seemed to suck in a breath.

3.

Will began to smile, the warmth of it bathing Hannibal's cheek before he turned to look at him.

2.

Where was Will's glass? When had he put it down?

1.

" Hannibal," Will breathed. "Happy New Year."

" *HAPPY NEW YEAR!"* The crowd on the TV shouted, and around them, the world exploded. Hannibal's world exploded, too, as suddenly Will's lips came crashing down on his,

a hard and passionate kiss claiming him fully. Hannibal barely managed to set his glass on the bedside table — otherwise, he would have dropped it — before he kissed Will back, taking Will's face in his hands as he did.

He pulled back when the need for breath consumed them both, but that didn't mean he was able to catch his.

In his periphery in the space just between their chests, he spotted Will holding something silver. His gaze lowered, heart hammering, as he took in what was pinched between Will's fingers.

It was a ring, a silver ring, and Hannibal could barely make out the beginning of an engraving in the low light.

"Will?" He asked, raising his eyes back to his mate's face.

"Will you marry me, Hannibal?"

Chapter 25

On New Year's Day, Will woke late in the morning, body sore and Hannibal curled around him, his chest against Will's back. Will stretched and groaned, feeling Hannibal shift behind him. Hannibal leaned forward, and Will tilted his head, letting Hannibal press closer, his nose against Will's throat. Will heard him inhale before his grip on Will tightened, and he was pulled back against Hannibal's chest.

Will sighed and curled closer again, his hand reaching for Hannibal's under the blankets until they linked together. Hannibal hummed, and Will could feel his satisfaction through the bond at keeping Will close. Hannibal moved his other arm so Will could pillow on it, letting his hand press against Will's chest.

Will opened his eyes, seeing a still, mostly full champagne glass in front of him from the night before. Neither of them had finished their champagne or taken more than one drink in celebration. The moment Will proposed, Hannibal was on him, his yeses repeated over and over in Will's mind. It took some time to wrestle the ring onto Hannibal's finger because Hannibal was far too determined to wrap his arms around Will's body. He managed, though, and soon Will's clothes were torn from him.

They spent most of the early morning hours making love, only falling asleep when the first rays of sunshine reached over the horizon.

Hannibal nuzzled the back of Will's neck before he pressed a kiss to his hair. Will sighed, forcing himself to roll over so he could face Hannibal fully and stretch his body. Hannibal only loosened his grip long enough for Will to turn around before he gripped him tighter, the metal of the ring warm against Will's back.

"Morning," Will murmured, reaching up to brush some hair from Hannibal's forehead.

"Good morning, my love," Hannibal answered, shifting closer to nuzzle his nose against Will's before kissing him gently.

Will kissed him back, his heart fluttering when they pulled apart slowly, lips still forming their kiss.

Across the room, Will's phone rang, and Will groaned, burying himself against Hannibal. Hannibal chuckled and lifted one hand to the back of Will's head, fingers burying in his hair. They were like that for a while before Will's phone chimed again. The dogs began to shuffle following the noise, and Will heard the distinct shake of their bodies. For a moment, he thought maybe they would lie down again, but soon the click of claws echoed on the floor, followed by a high-pitched whine.

Will sighed as Hannibal laughed, the two of them peeling apart. Hannibal stood first, moving across the room to collect Will's phone before handing it to him, where he lay on the bed. Then Hannibal opened the door to let out the dogs, unabashedly naked as he stepped through it himself.

Will took his phone in hand, noting the low battery as he pressed the screen, causing it to come to life.

His missed calls were from Beverly, it turned out, rather than Jack, and that was somewhat of a reprieve. That was, until he finally looked at the messages, the last of which contained a link to a Tattlecrime article.

Will sighed and opened it, wondering why he hated himself enough to do so, but he did it anyway, his curiosity besting him.

FBI Bloodhound With Mystery Man: Jack Crawford's Pet Finally Tamed?

Under the headline was a picture of Will and Hannibal in their matching silver and red suits at the Christmas party. They were pressed together, locked in an obviously intimate kiss, hands clasped and Will's face strangely peaceful in Hannibal's grasp. Will knew Freddie Lounds, Tattlecrime's most notorious journalist, hadn't been at the party, which meant someone leaked the picture. None of that irked him as much as the article under the image, which speculated on Hannibal's origins, even positing that he was Will's psychiatrist before their relationship began. Will's vision turned red at seeing Freddie suppose that Hannibal might have taken advantage of a fragile patient. However, the line that followed suggested that Will had brainwashed his lover, who was unaware of Will's darker traits.

Hannibal stepped back inside, following the dogs, his brows furrowed and his jaw taut.

"My love?" He asked, nearly tripping over the dogs to reach Will sooner. "I felt your anger. What's wrong?"

Will sighed and handed Hannibal the phone, not wanting to keep anything from him. He watched as Hannibal's jaw clenched and his eyes darkened.

"I'll kill her," Will muttered under his breath.

Next to him, Hannibal's eyes shot to his, and his lips pulled back into a pleased but strangely deadly smile. "There you are."

Will didn't murder Freddie Lounds in the end, though the thought crossed his mind more and more in the days that followed New Year's, especially when Jack called him to Baltimore.

Will stood outside the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, staring up at the intimidating facade of the building. The building seemed to beckon him forward but with the same energy as a roach motel. Will worried that once he entered, he wouldn't be let out again.

He told Jack as much when the man noticed something off about Will's posture for the first time in his life. Will had been followed by what he thought was a monster, and Jack never noticed anything wrong. That monster now belonged to Will, and much to Will's delight, he followed Will on his drive.

Will enjoyed seeing Hannibal's true form, catching glimpse after glimpse of dark antlers. Will desperately wanted to kiss those antlers, and he told Hannibal as much through the bond. He could feel Hannibal preen through the bond, always delighted to know how Will desired him.

Now, Will thought about killing Freddie Lounds again, learning that the reason he was about to step into such a foreboding building was because she had claimed that the infamous Chesapeake Ripper was already in custody.

Will knew the story of Abel Gideon, the man who was supposedly the Chesapeake Ripper. Already, the idea repulsed Will. It felt as though an ant was trying to claim godhood. He had seen the Ripper kills, not up close, but enough to know that the Ripper was an artist. While capable of equally brutal murder, Gideon hadn't displayed the same artistry when he killed his wife and in-laws.

Will walked through the halls of BSHCI, hearing catcalls echo from a distance. They couldn't tell who they were catcalling; they just knew someone new was there, and that was enticing.

The first person he was due to meet was Frederick Chilton, the man who ran BSHCI. While Will had never been formally introduced to him, he knew a bit about Chilton from those who had. Chilton's reputation preceded him. Most who encountered Chilton found him irritating and vain.

"Agent Crawford," Chilton greeted as they entered his office, eyes lighting up with amusement immediately. "And you must be Mr. Graham. Or is it Doctor Graham?" Chilton asked as he greeted Will, offering his hand for Will to shake.

"Special Agent Graham," Will corrected, though he desperately wanted to use a different last name.

"You're quite the talk of psychiatric circles," Chilton said as the three of them sat.

Will wanted to roll his eyes, but he refrained, looking somewhere over Chilton's shoulder to entertain himself.

For a moment, Will's vision blurred, and in the back of his mind, the bond tugged.

Why are you speaking with Frederick Chilton?

Will froze, ignoring whatever question was directed his way.

How did you know? Will asked, tugging lightly at the bond to catch Hannibal's attention. Will paused for a second, ignoring the world around him even as Jack and Chilton directed him toward the crime scene Gideon had left. *How do you know Frederick Chilton?*

He's not human. Hannibal answered. *At least not fully.*

Is he like you? Has he mated with a human? Will asked, stepping into the room where a nurse's body was impaled on various medical instruments. None of it, not the crime scene,

not Chilton's wandering eyes behind him, not the lure of Abel Gideon in the crime scene he left behind, could drag Will's attention away from Hannibal.

Yes and no. Hannibal answered. *But Frederick Chilton does not matter. Aren't you more curious why we can talk so far apart?*

I assumed that was normal. We haven't been that far apart since the bond was made- Will trailed off. *Do you think it was the bond strengthening?*

I do.

Will closed his eyes, focusing not on the body in front of him but rather on Hannibal. He reached for him through the bond, and after a moment, he felt Hannibal reach back. Then he was tugged, and his eyes flew open. But rather than seeing through his own eyes, he saw through Hannibal's.

The world was black and white when he was in this form, but Will could see the beginnings of red. Hannibal moved closer, and suddenly he was at the window, gazing at Will as he stood in front of the body, eyes closed.

Hannibal was gone before anyone could see him, but Will relaxed slightly, having felt Hannibal's presence even while he saw through his eyes.

Frederick Chilton is 3/4 human. His mother was human, and his father was half-human. I'm confident he'll tell you. He tells anyone who will listen.

When did you meet him?

A few years ago. Hannibal answered.

Will opened his eyes, looking at the body in front of him. This wasn't the Ripper; he only needed a glance at the body to know. Mutilation for the sake of mutilation was often the cause of death for Ripper victims. But there was always an artistic edge to the bodies. This was blunt reproduction, an amateur trying to reproduce the works of DaVinci.

You like the Ripper. Hannibal said, his voice even.

Will sighed. *Not like I like you.*

Hannibal was silent at that, and Will forced himself to turn back to Jack, telling him what he knew. Jack seemed surprised and disappointed, but that wasn't Will's concern. Hannibal's silence was.

As Jack and Will began to exit the building, Chilton called from behind them, asking for a moment with Will.

"Promise me, you won't leave without me," Will muttered bitterly.

Jack chuckled and promised before Will returned with Chilton to his office.

The moment Chilton sat down, he began to grin, fangs growing and eyes flashing white before his human face returned. Will blinked at him, unamused, before sitting in the same chair he had sat in earlier.

"Well, well," Chilton began. "Just when I thought you couldn't be more interesting. Imagine my surprise to find out you've mated with someone like me."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Will answered, keeping his voice even.

"Yes, you do," Chilton answered. His demeanor had changed between the time Will walked into BSCHI and now. Before, Chilton seemed to swagger, his whole personality on display in his very walk. He wanted attention; he demanded attention and was willing to claw his way through anyone to have it. Now, he was almost calm as he watched Will across the desk. "Do I know your lucky mate?"

"If you've paid attention to the creative writing of Miss Lounds, you'd know I have a very human partner."

Chilton hummed. "Yes. And what an unusual name too. *Hannibal Lecter.*" He steepled his fingers. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say it was the same Hannibal I once knew. Who was much like me. You see, Mr. Graham, I'm not fully human. My mother was, but my father wasn't entirely."

Told you so. Hannibal teased through the bond.

Will sighed with relief at hearing Hannibal's voice.

"That Hannibal and I have known each other for a while. I'd be quite surprised if he mated with you," Chilton continued.

Will raised an eyebrow in response.

"You don't seem his type."

"And you are?" Will asked, purposefully sounding bored.

Chilton smirked.

If only he knew how to take a hint. Hannibal grumbled.

What do you mean? Will asked.

"Well, this conversation has been-" Will paused as he stood. "Useless. Have a good day, Frederick."

"Dr. Chilton," Chilton corrected.

"Whatever you say, Frederick," Will called over his shoulder as he walked from the office.

Frederick and I do know each other. Hannibal explained as Will walked back through the halls of BSCHI. *But he has always been unable to take no for an answer. One would think the murder of those with similar personality types would be off-putting enough.*

What are you saying, Hannibal? Will asked as he stepped from the building.

Jack nodded to him from his car before he started the SUV. Will had driven down on his own, saying it would be easier if they met there rather than him waiting for Will to show up at Quantico and then go.

Will walked toward his own car, unsurprised when someone else appeared at the hood, dressed in a pair of dress slacks and a bright red sweater.

"You brought clothes with you?" Will asked as Hannibal grinned at him.

"Of course," Hannibal answered, pulling Will into his arms the moment he was close enough. "Even being apart for a car ride is torture enough."

Will smiled and let himself be tucked into Hannibal's grasp. He gently nuzzled Hannibal's throat, inhaling his distinct scent.

"What murders were you talking about?" Will asked lowly, whispering the words into Hannibal's ear.

"My darling," Hannibal answered, pulling Will away slightly so he could grasp his face. "*I* am the Chesapeake Ripper."

Chapter 26

Will gripped the steering wheel tightly the whole drive home. Hannibal could see his knuckles turning white from the passenger's seat. His mate was uncharacteristically guarded on the drive home, his mind and body closed to Hannibal in a way they hadn't been since they first met. Will's face was blank, his ocean eyes staring at the road ahead.

They made the drive from Baltimore to Wolf Trap in record time, Hannibal thought. The only faster way would have been Hannibal running. Will was silent throughout the whole drive, so much so that Hannibal wondered if he was angry, though he couldn't understand why.

He had heard the way Will was thinking about the Ripper, about Hannibal, even if he didn't know it was Hannibal. Those thoughts were almost ones of awe, as he thought about the way the Ripper kills were art. But Will hadn't responded one way or another after Hannibal told him he was the Ripper. He only told Hannibal to get in the car. Will pulled out of the parking lot so fast, Hannibal didn't even have time to put on his seatbelt.

Will left the car before he did, walking to the door to let the dogs out before Hannibal even unbuckled himself. Something was off about his posture; he was tenser than Hannibal had seen him since Will first caught sight of him.

Had he angered his god? Why would Will be angry about this? Will knew he had killed before, he told Will as much only a day after letting Hannibal inside his own house, and Will had accepted him entirely. He had even killed in front of Will, and Will had run his hands through the blood on Hannibal's skin, tucking himself closer to Hannibal and even kissing him when they fell into bed together.

Yet now, after this particular confession, Will was acting strangely.

The dogs charged forward the moment the door was open, running to Hannibal for pets before scattering around the yard. Will stood at the front door, arms crossed, watching the dogs critically as they ran around the property, relieving themselves. Then, Will whistled once they were done, not giving them enough time to explore before he beckoned them back to the house.

Hannibal came too when Will whistled, watching him closely. Will held the door open for him then followed him inside the house.

Hannibal kicked off his shoes, hearing Will do the same. Then Will shut the front door fully and locked it, the sound of the metal sliding into place nearly ominous.

Hannibal just started to turn to look at Will when he was suddenly tugged with force against the front door. Will's lips crashed down on his, his whole body pressed against Hannibal to the point that Hannibal couldn't tell where he ended and Will began. Will's grip was bruising as he pinned Hannibal to the door, determined, it seemed, to suck out Hannibal's very soul through their kiss.

Will broke away after a moment, his ocean eyes dark and his chest heaving.

"You can never tell anyone else that you're the Ripper," Will said, leaving no room for argument. "Do you understand? No one. Only me."

"Will-" Hannibal began, his brain rushing to catch up with Will's actions.

"No one," Will repeated. "They'll try to take you away from me, and I'll kill them all before that can happen."

Hannibal cocked his head, his brain strangely sluggish as he caught up to what Will was telling him. As he looked at his mate in front of him, he saw the same dark look in his eyes when he declared he would kill Freddie Lounds, the journalist who wrote a story about them both. Will's gaze was dark and heavy, his whole body angled toward Hannibal in a way that made Hannibal wonder if he should fear for his life. It was predatory, Will's stance, and Hannibal knew that if Will wanted, he could kill him too. But he wouldn't. He knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that Will wouldn't hurt him. He'd rather tear the whole world down before he did that.

"Do you understand me, Hannibal?" Will repeated.

"Yes," Hannibal breathed, and suddenly Will was on him again, his kisses harsh and bruising. And Hannibal wanted it all. He wanted the vicious being who was currently pressing against him. His god was brutal and terrifying.

Will's lips were demanding against Hannibal's, and his body still pinned him to the door. He knew Will wouldn't let go any time soon, and as Will pressed closer, Hannibal understood why.

He was *aroused.* The knowledge that Hannibal was the Chesapeake Ripper had aroused him. Hannibal had seen Will grip the steering wheel before like he did today, and then, it was arousal too. Will had been trying to contain himself from jumping on Hannibal right there in the parking lot.

He wasn't trying to contain himself now as he pressed against Hannibal, hard and demanding.

Hannibal smiled into the rough kisses, wrapping his arms around Will to hold them together. Will groaned then nipped at Hannibal's bottom lip, tugging it between his teeth.

"I heard you," Will whispered, his lips wandering down to Hannibal's jaw. Hot breath danced over Hannibal's skin as Will continued lower. "You were worried I would reject you for being the Ripper." Will's lips found his neck, and he pressed a light kiss to Hannibal's thundering pulse. "There's one thing you need to understand," Will continued, his hands moving to grip Hannibal's hips. "*You're mine.*" Will dragged his hips forward then, forcing their lower bodies to press together, their cocks brushing through the restraints of their pants.

Hannibal groaned, reaching to hold Will tightly. Hannibal spun them, using the advantage of catching Will off guard to pin him against the door now. Will groaned on impact, hands

roaming greedily over Hannibal's body.

Hannibal kissed him roughly, thinking idly of how beautifully Will's lips would swell from their combined onslaughts.

Then, he pushed away from Will, who protested with a groan as he leaned against the door.

Hannibal stepped back so he was out of arm's reach before he slowly lowered himself to the ground, one knee at a time.

"I *am* yours," He said, spreading his arms out to either side. It was an act of supplication, an offering to a god. The metal of the ring on his left hand seemed to warm as he did, a physical reminder of the bond between them and another yet to come. "Yours entirely. Yours to do what you want with. I am devout, and you are my god. Nothing in the world can compare to my devotion to you."

Will's lips parted as he spoke, his eyes darkening to the point they looked like the ocean on a stormy night. The moment Hannibal finished speaking, Will was on him again, tackling him to the floor under another onslaught of kisses.

Beautiful. Will's thoughts said. They weren't directed at Hannibal, but they were about Hannibal, and that seemed to be enough. *Beautiful. Beautiful. Beautiful, perfect Hannibal. My Hannibal. My god, my lover, my mate. Hannibal. Hannibal. Hannibal.*

Hannibal thought he would drown under Will between the physical onslaught and the mental worship. Hannibal had learned quickly that Will's love languages were different than Hannibal's. Hannibal brought gifts and worshipped with touch, but Will acted. He brought Hannibal into his house, offered Hannibal his bed, worshipped Hannibal in the privacy of his own mind because saying the words aloud was too much for him to bear. But the bond allowed Hannibal to bear it with him, to bear everything with him. And Hannibal would gladly do so. He would help Will hold the world if that's what he needed.

Will seemed to shake over him, his body trembling in Hannibal's grasp.

Hannibal tightened his grip on his mate before he let his other form loose slightly, using the speed of his true form to launch them onto the bed from the floor.

Will gasped on impact, his body tucked under Hannibal's now. Hannibal quickly covered his mate, protecting him from the world. Will's trembling decreased once Hannibal was over him, though it didn't subside entirely. His grip on Hannibal changed, though, his desperation a different kind now. No longer was it the desperation of a worthy predator, but now one of one mate who needed the touch of the other.

Hannibal found he needed Will's touch, too, as those familiar wandering hands soothed something within him that had reared its head during the car ride.

"Please," Will whispered, begged. "Please."

Hannibal found he was pleading too, though his pleas were spoken in a language only he and Will could hear.

Together, they managed to tear their clothes off, hands fighting with fabric to bare them to each other. One of them managed to grab the lube during their frantic disrobing, though Hannibal didn't know who. An act done by Will's hands was the same as an act done by Hannibal's, their very nerves, heartbeats, and thoughts so entangled that they were one being in two bodies.

Hannibal knew what Will needed; he always knew what Will needed, so as he opened the lube, he used it to begin to prepare himself, fingers working in a frenzied fashion to open him. Will's fingers joined his, the two of them working together to prepare Hannibal, dual sets of fingers pressing into his body.

"Hurry," Will pleaded. "You're too far."

Together, they lubed Will's cock before Hannibal began to sink, feeling Will split him open in the best of ways.

Hannibal didn't move far from Will, keeping their chests pressed together as he slowly ground his hips, using what little room he had to pull his hips up and rock down on Will's cock. Will's legs pulled up the bed enough that Hannibal could feel his thighs against his ass as Will began thrusting with him.

Hannibal rode him as best he could, though he couldn't bring himself to move far enough away to do it properly. Will didn't seem to mind. He buried his face in Hannibal's clavicle, hands gripping Hannibal's back.

Hannibal could feel himself shift between forms, his true form and human form unable to decide which should receive Will's attentions.

Hannibal bent his head as Will raised his, their foreheads touching.

All at once, Hannibal's mind was filled with visions of him and Will locked in intimate embraces. He could see the pleasure on Will's face, the pleasure on his own. He could feel Will's hands on him, not just in their bed but in his mind as well. He and Will seemed to switch positions in the images that flashed through his mind, but the ultimate goal was the same. They were locked together in the throes of passion, bodies joined.

Hannibal followed those images, finding Will on the other end, reaching for him in return.

Will's arms wrapped around him in their minds while his arms tightened on Hannibal in the real world. Their lips met over and over as Will crawled into his lap, naked already.

The Will in the real world groaned, nails digging into Hannibal's back as he thrust languidly into him, seemingly unable to rush. But he wasn't able to hold back either. Hannibal could feel his pleasure build, already at the edge quickly. Hannibal was there as well, driven even further by the joining in their minds.

The Will in their minds, his Will but a mental projection, was already on Hannibal's cock, the need for preparation gone in a mindscape. If he could call it that. He didn't quite know what this was, only that the bond allowed it. Because of the mating bond, he could have Will here and in the real world at the same time; their positions reversed but the passion and need equally as strong.

Hannibal could feel Will on his cock just as entirely as he could feel Will's cock within him. It felt so real, to be joined both ways at once, that he couldn't comprehend where one ended and the other began. But neither truly ended and truly began anywhere separate.

"Hannibal," Will moaned, his grip on Hannibal tight everywhere.

The Will in their minds rode Hannibal much more roughly than either could force themselves to move in reality. Hannibal could taste Will's pleasure on his tongue, both where he bounced on Hannibal's cock and where he ground himself inside Hannibal.

They were connected, so connected on so many levels, that Hannibal came undone quicker than he ever had. Will was right behind him, the Will in their minds and the Will in his arms shuddering through his orgasms as both Hannibals did.

Hannibal forced his eyes open, no longer able to see the Will in his mind, though he was greeted by the ethereal sight of Will in his arms. Will peeled his eyes open too, and as he did, Hannibal caught sight of tears that began to slip down his cheeks slowly.

Hannibal bent himself to nuzzle against Will, not yet letting Will slip free from his body.

Will whined against him, a broken sound that had Hannibal's heart clenching in his chest.

I've never- Will began, his voice echoing in Hannibal's mind, saying what he couldn't force himself to aloud. *I've never needed someone the way I need you. I thought I was fine alone. But I never realized how alone I was. I need you, Hannibal. I can't- I don't know if- I don't know who I am anymore without you.*

Hannibal ducked his head, pressing a gentle kiss to Will's lips.

Stay with me. Will begged, his grip on Hannibal tightening enough to break bones if he wasn't careful.

I am with you. Hannibal answered, reaching again through the bond to find Will's mind, taking the projection of Will there into his arms as well.

Will held him, and he held Will, neither of them able to part.

Mate. My mate. Will thought, the words echoing around Hannibal's mind as well. *I will hold him for eternity.*

Chapter 27

Spring seemed to come quickly for Will. Maybe it was anticipation, or maybe it was the fact that Hannibal kept to his word, which kept Will distracted. They kept each other warm during the winter and even during spring's false start. Most days were spent together, with only a few hours apart. Will taught and worked cases as the weather warmed, but he longed to return to Hannibal the whole time.

As usual, Hannibal followed him to Quantico or crime scenes; Will glanced antlers and white eyes often. Hannibal surprised him too; he brought him lunch on the days he taught or needed to be in Quantico for some reason; the two of them huddled together in Will's office.

In that time, Hannibal told him about the Ripper kills, about their execution, about the victims. Will could see it all unfold in front of his eyes, even without Hannibal sharing the memories with him. He did that, too, and Will could taste death on his tongue each time, his heart beating faster every time Hannibal showed him.

Hannibal showed him other things, too. Memories from his childhood, Mischa, and eventually, he showed Will Mischa's death and the subsequent kills of her murderers. Will held Hannibal through the whole thing, eventually moving Hannibal to pillow on his chest, cradling his mate against him as he remembered the feelings of that dark time.

Now, it was spring, and true to his word, Hannibal took Will someplace for his change.

Will let the dogs out in the morning, making certain they had plenty of food and water. Hannibal made them lunch and dinner, just in case, packing it in a bag with a blanket. Together, the two of them climbed into the car, and Hannibal guided him, directing him toward the location he had probably picked out months ago for Will's transformation.

Their fingers were laced through the whole drive with Will's other hand on the steering wheel.

The closer they came, the more Will's heart began to speed, anticipation and nervousness running through his veins. Hannibal's thumb gently stroked the back of his hand, soothing him the whole way. Will didn't know what he would do without Hannibal; something like this might have been nearly impossible without him, not just because he wouldn't have had the mating bond.

They drove for a while before they found themselves on a dirt road. Will drove slowly, feeling the car rock as they maneuvered over the road.

"Here," Hannibal said suddenly, and Will stopped the car.

He looked around them, seeing high, green trees surrounding them. Together, he and Hannibal climbed from the car. Hannibal reached into the backseat, grabbing the bag they brought with them before meeting Will at the front of the car, their fingers lacing again.

Both of them had worn comfortable, easy-to-remove clothing. Both wore sweatpants and t-shirts. The day wasn't too warm or too cool, a perfect spring day. Clouds drifted lazily across the sky, blocking the sun now and then. A slight breeze rustled the trees, making leaves and pines shake above their heads as Will and Hannibal walked through them.

Hannibal seemed to know exactly where he was going as he directed Will, gentle tugs on his hand causing Will to change directions.

The hike wasn't a long one before they came to a clearing. Or rather a meadow.

It was a wide clearing with flowers and grasses that came up to Will's knees. The breeze made the flowers sway gently, their scents wafting toward Will.

The whole meadow smelled sweet and somehow calming. The trees surrounding it were thick, as though they had purposefully isolated the meadow from the rest of the world.

Will smiled, feeling Hannibal's gaze on him as he evaluated the world around them.

"Do you like it?" Hannibal asked.

"It's perfect," Will breathed, turning to Hannibal. Hannibal smiled before tugging Will into his grasp, the two of them walking hip to hip further into the clearing.

"The calming scent you're smelling is lavender," Hannibal told him. "I thought perhaps it would help your transition."

"You said it would be painful," Will muttered, remembering their conversations leading up to this day.

Hannibal nodded. "I wish there were something I could do to lessen it, but it will not be easy. But I will be here with you the whole time."

"I know," Will answered, turning toward him once they were further into the meadow. "That's why I'm not afraid."

Hannibal smiled and dropped the bag, using his now free hand to tug Will closer, wrapping him in his arms. Will tucked himself into Hannibal's grasp, inhaling that same familiar scent of Hannibal, combined with the smells of the meadow.

Eventually, Hannibal pulled away, his hands gently petting over Will's shoulders.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes," Will answered.

Hannibal smiled, then stepped away, kicking off his shoes. Will mimicked him, removing his shoes and then the rest of his clothing. If it were under any other circumstance, he might feel awkward casually undressing while out in the open. But he knew Hannibal took him somewhere not easily stumbled upon.

Eventually, they folded their clothing and set them next to the bag.

Hannibal reached for him, once again dragging Will into his grasp. Will sighed at the feeling of Hannibal's skin against his. Hannibal turned his head, burying his nose in Will's neck. Will groaned, turning his head to allow Hannibal his inhale.

Hannibal reached a hand up to pet through Will's hair, the two of them holding each other for a moment longer.

"I'm ready, Hannibal," Will whispered.

"All right, my love," Hannibal answered. "Take a deep breath." Will obeyed, inhaling slowly and exhaling just as slow. "Clear your mind."

Will wanted to protest that; both knew that was not an easy feat for Will. He closed his eyes anyway, focusing on stilling his thoughts. He inhaled and exhaled again, forcing his mind to calm.

"Now," Hannibal murmured in his ear. "Focus on the bond. Find it, let it fill you."

Will obeyed, searching out the bond then bathing it. He could feel Hannibal, too, his body in Will's arms and his mind gently pressing against Will's.

"Focus on what you want to become. Focus on me and what I am, then picture yourself like me."

Will obeyed, thinking of Hannibal's true form, the oily black skin, the white eyes, his fangs, his antlers, the softness of his skin. He thought of the feeling of Hannibal's claws against his skin and the feeling of his true form in Will's arms.

As he focused, he felt something begin to tug at the back of his mind. It was gentle at first, then demanding. He knew it wasn't Hannibal; this was different. This was him, another part of him that had been silently waiting for his attention.

"Don't fight it," Hannibal whispered to him. "Let yourself be free."

Will faced the demanding force in the back of his mind, the caged monster that had only recently been set free. Hannibal set him free, and only now was Will acknowledging it.

He could feel it wrap around him like a suffocating blanket. His lungs clenched, demanding air that no longer seemed to be there. His heart seemed to skip a beat, and on the next, it began to pump acid through his veins.

Will cried out, feeling the acid rush through him, igniting every nerve along the way until it bathed his fingers and toes.

Hannibal's grip tightened on him as Will's muscles tensed, every one of them seeming to tear at the same time.

His head pounded as though his brain was trying to escape through his ears and eyes.

Then, his bones seemed to snap, the sounds echoing in Will's head as they twisted and rearranged. He could feel the very sinew adjust itself and grow back together.

His fingers grew longer, the nails of his hands stretching and sharpening. His feet folded back on themselves, bones snapping and hardening. He felt them shift into hooves, the ground under his feet feeling different to the touch.

The pounding in his worsened to the point that Will's knees gave out.

Hannibal dropped with him, soothing him gently. Will didn't know what he was saying, but he could hear the rumble of Hannibal's voice, felt it against his chest. Hannibal gently petted over him, his hands soothing over Will's skin as that too began to shift.

Will gripped Hannibal, clinging to him in his pain. Hannibal held him just as tightly, his voice no longer out loud but echoing in Will's mind.

Will's skull felt like it unwound then reformed, squeezing his brain. Then, something snapped, loud and unforgiving. Will cried out again, his voice sounding foreign.

Then something began to grow, expanding and twisting high above him.

Will's body arched in Hannibal's arms, feeling like he was on fire and bathed in ice at the same time. Every nerve was a live wire and every muscle burned.

Will's whole body shook, and he burrowed into Hannibal, needing the comfort he offered readily.

It felt like an eternity before his body began to calm, and soon the rest of the world began to filter in.

The breeze in the meadow soothed Will's burning skin. The birds around them chirped, and the grass swayed, a noise Will could hear again. Hannibal gently petted over him still, his hands soft.

Will buried himself against Hannibal, needing to be held.

My lovely darling. Hannibal soothed. *You've done so well.*

Did I do it? Will asked, unable to open his eyes.

You did it, my love. Hannibal answered, his grip on Will tightening. *Open your eyes.*

Will obeyed, peeling his eyes open. The world was black and white as Will opened his eyes. He searched around them. Where there had once been greens, yellows, purples, and reds, there was now black and white. That was until he looked at Hannibal.

Much like Will was when he looked through Hannibal's eyes, a halo of red surrounded Hannibal. But there was more too.

Will's eyes scanned Hannibal's face, the face of his true form, taking in details he had never noticed before.

Had he always had that scar on his nose? And what about the one on his cheek? Had that always been there? Will reached for him, his arm aching as he lifted it, pressing a hand to Hannibal's cheek. A hand that now had long claws.

Was Hannibal always this soft?

Yes, Will decided. He had known that for months now.

Will's eyes found Hannibal's, and he gasped. Hannibal's eyes weren't truly white. He could see bits of amber within them, not at all visible to the human eye. But Will's eyes seemed to be better in this form, allowing him to see those amber specs.

Will shifted closer, utterly enchanted by Hannibal in front of him. Hannibal waited patiently while Will evaluated him. He leaned forward to bury his nose in Hannibal's neck. Above them, their antlers tangled, and Will moaned. The feeling was an erotic one, as Hannibal's antlers met his. He shivered, their antlers knocking. Hannibal moaned, too, a soft sound that was music to Will's overwhelmed ears.

He remembered the first time he touched Hannibal's antlers and how Hannibal had moaned then. Did it feel as good to Hannibal as it did to Will?

Yes. Hannibal answered.

Will smiled, feeling the fangs in his mouth as he did. Hannibal had told him about the other feature of their strengthened bond. Not only did it allow them to communicate over a distance and have each other mentally while they had each other physically, the bond allowed them to hear — not just thoughts directed at them — but thoughts about each other.

Will shifted from his position, no longer held in Hannibal's grasp, but sitting in his lap. His hands explored, claws gently dragging. Hannibal moaned, swaying slightly as he let Will explore.

Will leaned forward again, antlers brushing with Hannibal's, as he buried his face in Hannibal's neck. Hannibal's scent was intoxicating. Will felt like he was drunk with the way Hannibal's scent filled his nose and wrapped around his brain. He wanted more; he needed more, the feeling and scent of Hannibal not enough.

He leaned closer, pressing his lips to Hannibal's neck before sucking gently. He had done this before when he first noticed Hannibal's scent, but now he could taste him even more. There was a specific spice on Will's tongue as he pressed it to Hannibal's skin, something so uniquely Hannibal that it had Will moaning.

"Will," Hannibal said in the same soft way he reserved only for Will.

Will leaned back, finding Hannibal's face again.

"Hannibal," He said, somehow knowing that it was the only word he could say aloud.

You're beautiful. Hannibal whispered the bond between them wrapped so tightly around Will's brain, he could feel the very neurons of Hannibal's brain as they fired.

I- Will tried. *You. You're beautiful. A god. And I can* see *you. I see you.*

And I see you. Hannibal said, his grip on Will tightening.

They leaned forward at the same time, foreheads pressing together. Will's whole body tingled at the touch, accompanied by the same feeling that often came with their kisses.

Will wondered if it was the same feeling, tilting his head to press his lips to Hannibal's.

The same tingling rushed through Will's body, his heart jumping.

You were kissing me the whole time. Will realized, his grip on Hannibal tightened. *Why didn't you tell me?*

I never wanted you to feel uncomfortable. And then you kissed me, and that was heaven.

Will sighed, resting against Hannibal.

They stayed like that for a while, Hannibal kneeling on the ground with Will in his lap.

Do you want to explore, my darling?

Will nodded.

Standing was difficult, his whole body feeling foreign. But Hannibal held him the entire time, guiding him.

They stood, and Will looked around again. While the world was black and white, everything was sharper. He could see the spidroins of a spider's web high in the trees. He could see every dip and divot in the bark of the trees. He could see tiny drops of water that sat on flower pedals.

Hannibal smiled at him as he looked around, and Will knew his face was one of awe.

Listen. Hannibal coaxed.

Will let his eyes drop, seeing the rise and fall of Hannibal's chest while focused on his ears. He could hear the fluttering heartbeats of a bird nearby, the chewing of a rabbit in the woods, and the hum of engines far away.

He moved before he realized what he was doing, suddenly tearing out of Hannibal's grasp to rocket toward a tree, seeing a bird flutter in its nest at the sudden movement.

He knew Hannibal turned; Will felt his gaze on his back.

Then, Hannibal's heart skipped a beat, and Will's attention turned back toward him again.

The distance gave Will a chance to see him fully. He looked like a god. His antlers extending toward the sky, his beautiful, broad form making Will's heart skip a beat itself. Hannibal held up his arms, opening them for Will to climb back into them.

Will was across the meadow against less than a second, colliding with Hannibal's solid form. Hannibal barely moved when Will crashed into him, holding Will tightly when he was back in his arms.

Will kissed him, his body tingling and his heart racing.

God, Hannibal was beautiful. He was perfect. And he was Will's. His mate.

Will moved closer, his need for Hannibal suddenly becoming demanding.

Will. Hannibal murmured, his hands gently petting down his back. *So eager, my love.*

Want you. Will muttered, pressing closer.

The very touch of Hannibal was electric. Will wanted to melt right there. How had Hannibal managed all those times Will touched him if he felt this? Will wanted nothing more than to be one with Hannibal; the need for him so great, his throat was clenching. He felt parched, deprived, starving.

Will. Hannibal soothed. *Patience, my darling.*

Will huffed in protest, holding onto Hannibal tighter.

Aren't you curious what your animal form will be? Hannibal asked.

All at once, Will remembered. He remembered Hannibal's deer form, and he knew he could do something similar too. Excitement grew in his veins as he thought about it, his brain throwing around millions of ideas.

Hannibal chuckled and soothed his arms, his gaze soft and adoring.

This will be easier. He assured Will.

Hannibal stepped back, putting some space between the two of them.

All you need to do is want it.

Between blinks, he changed, and suddenly, his stag form stood in front of Will. Will gaped, staring at the millions of sparkles that erupted from his feathers. He stepped closer, unable to help himself, reaching for those enchanting and soft feathers, feeling them under his fingertips. Each feather felt like it had diamonds embedded into it, with the same soft feeling surrounding them.

Hannibal gently nuzzled Will's arm, his muzzle so soft to the touch that Will thought he might melt into a puddle.

Will reached for him, gently stroking over Hannibal's muzzle and head, admiring the way he felt under Will's touch.

Now you. Hannibal murmured, gently butting his head against Will's hands.

Will took a step back, though the action was nearly painful. He thought about what Hannibal said, about just wanting to change into an animal form.

Hannibal was right, of course, that the change into an animal was easier. Will barely felt it before he suddenly found himself on all fours. He could still feel antlers on his head, and for a moment, he wondered if Hannibal had been wrong about his animal form, if he was, in fact, a deer.

Hannibal snorted, his head bobbing. Then he raised one of his hooves before seemingly pointing at Will's.

Will dipped his head, looking down at his own feet. Or rather, paws. He had paws. His head shot up, and he turned, trying to better catch a glimpse of himself.

He had a tail; he could feel it. A tail. A tail that seemed to wag as Will turned, trying to see it and his body better.

Hannibal huffed, and Will's attention returned to him. The moment their gazes met, Will felt himself tugged through the bond. Then, he saw himself through Hannibal's eyes.

A wolf. He was a wolf.

Except he still had antlers.

That would have been weird enough, except his body was covered in feathers, like Hannibal. Rather than the sparkles that decorated Hannibal's body, Will's feathers were different. It was the only other color that Hannibal could see, as Will's feathers seemed to shimmer various shades of blue.

Like the ocean. Hannibal told him.

Will returned to his own body, once again seeing Hannibal in front of him. He stepped closer, feeling every spec of dirt under his paws as he stepped closer. Hannibal stood still as Will neared, letting him move closer and explore still, now in a different form.

Will stepped to Hannibal, inhaling as he neared. There was the same intoxicating scent, and Will buried his nose in the feathers in Hannibal's neck.

Hannibal turned his head, gently resting his chin on the back of Will's neck.

It was a hug, Will realized, but the kind Hannibal could do in this form.

Will pulled back slightly, seeing those same amber eyes he was used to. He was grateful he could still see Hannibal's eyes as he moved closer, lowering his head to press his forehead to Hannibal's.

The tingling sensation overtook him again, and Will shuddered.

Before he could stop himself, he licked Hannibal's muzzle close to his mouth. Hannibal shuddered and stepped closer, his tongue gently trailing up Will's nose to the space between his eyes.

Will whined at the feeling.

Then, Hannibal stepped away and dropped himself, his front two hooves extended in front of him like when he played with the dogs.

Will mimicked him, dropping on his front two paws, tail wagging.

Catch me if you can. Hannibal taunted playfully, then suddenly he was gone.

Will took off after him, Hannibal's scent guiding the way. He could feel Hannibal before he saw him, the two of them running so fast that everything was a blur. Everything except Hannibal, who Will caught up to, the two of them running side by side.

Will would have whooped if he could, the exhilaration of keeping pace with Hannibal making his whole body feel like a live wire.

It turned out that he could do something similar, as a howl ripped from his throat before he knew what he was doing.

He could feel Hannibal's adoration at the sound, the two of them still keeping pace with one another.

Will could hear the way Hannibal's hooves thundered; he could hear his heartbeat in his chest. Will felt when Hannibal turned, turning with him until they were headed in a different direction. The two of them ran up the side of a mountain, the air cooling and thinning as they reached the top.

Will had no idea where they were, but he knew the mountain was high. At the top of it, he could see everything. He could see clouds that hovered below them, the sun in the distance bathing everything in what he knew was a golden light. In the distance, he could see the outlines of people and cars the size of ants moving in a colony.

Hannibal's gaze was on him as he stared at the world around them.

Hannibal tilted his head closer, gently nudging Will's neck.

Will turned toward him, his cheek rubbing against Hannibal's.

Their bodies curled toward each other, the two of them curling closer.

I love you. Hannibal whispered.

I love you too. Will answered.

I'll race you back. Hannibal said, his voice holding a teasing edge.

Will would have grinned if he could, and together the two of them started back down the mountain, nearly flying toward the meadow once again.

Much to his surprise, Will arrived first, crashing into the meadow. He turned, eyes desperately searching for Hannibal when suddenly he was barreled into.

He and Hannibal went rolling, the two of them tangled together. When they came to a stop, Will was on his back, pinned under Hannibal. Hannibal leaned forward to nuzzle against his neck, and Will sighed. He felt his tongue loll out of his mouth, panting slightly.

Hannibal bent, pressing his head next to Will's.

Will adjusted, and suddenly he was aware of how close Hannibal was, how he pinned him, the way their bodies were aligned.

Will tilted his head and licked Hannibal again, this time slower.

Chapter 28

There was no way Hannibal didn't know Will was trying to seduce him. He didn't react, though, to Will's slow lick at his muzzle, so he did it again. That earned him a reaction, Hannibal's irises blowing wide. Will licked him again, his body wiggling under the deer form on top of him. Hannibal bent his head, his nose burying in the feathers at Will's neck.

When he lifted his head again, he changed, his true form now hovering above Will.

Stay like that. Hannibal instructed, and Will obeyed, lying on his back with Hannibal over him.

Hannibal reached for Will, gently stroking over the feathers on Will's sides and stomach. Will found himself arching into Hannibal's hand when he petted over his belly. Will understood now why the dogs liked the belly rubs so much; something about it was just so relaxing and warming. Hannibal's fingers gently stroked over Will, moving up to his head. This wasn't the first time Hannibal pet him, both had done their fair share of exploration of each other, but Will knew he was purposefully giving this form attention.

Will licked Hannibal again when he leaned closer, his tongue gently trailing over his neck. Hannibal shivered, his eyes finding Will's.

Will knew immediately that Hannibal wanted his other form, and switching between that and his wolf form was far easier than going from human to Hannibal's species.

Will changed quickly, feeling his limbs extend and muscles shift until he returned to the humanoid form. Hannibal leaned forward and kissed him gently, their lips brushing, though not nearly enough. Will whined, needing more. He reached for Hannibal, fingers gently stroking over his cheek. Will was wary of his claws, and for the first time, he understood why Hannibal always used the backs of his knuckles.

Hannibal smiled at him softly, his gaze adoring as he nuzzled Will. Will sighed, tilting his head slightly so their antlers could tangle. The same arousing, erotic feeling from before was back when their antlers brushed, making Will moan.

Everything was overwhelming. Hannibal's touch as he gently stroked over Will's body was electric. The feeling of their antlers tangled together drove Will mad. He could hear Hannibal's heart in his chest, the beats steadily increasing with every touch. Will's own heart rate was increasing, beating in time with Hannibal's.

He reached for Hannibal, his hands finding soft skin. Will could feel every roll of Hannibal's muscles, could feel the pulse of veins and arteries under his fingertips.

Hannibal leaned forward, tilting Will's head to lower his lips to Will's neck. Will moaned when Hannibal kissed him, his whole body a live wire. The want from before came roaring back, and Will reached for Hannibal, dragging him over his body. Hannibal let himself be moved, his body resting over Will's.

Patience, my love. Hannibal whispered though he kissed Will deeply. Will groaned and kissed him back, wrapping his arms around Hannibal's body.

Hannibal felt amazing against him, as though he belonged there. He couldn't explain it. He had known for a while that Hannibal was the missing piece to his life, but something about this made him feel so much better. He kept one hand on Hannibal's back, the other traveling up his body to gently stroke his antlers. Hannibal moaned, the sound going right to Will's rapidly hardening cock.

He could feel Hannibal's arousal press against him, the two of them slowly rutting together.

This is not patience. Hannibal teased. He did nothing to move away from Will, though, as their bodies continued to rock together.

I want you now. Patience be damned. Will answered.

Hannibal hummed, kissing Will deeper. Their kisses grew more and more passionate as their bodies adjusted, making room for each other. Hannibal's hands continued to pet over Will's body; the electricity of his touches combined with the same tingling sensations of their kisses had Will shaking under Hannibal.

Please, Hannibal. Will begged. *I can't wait much longer.*

Hannibal gripped Will tighter, claws pressing against Will's hips. Will moaned at the feeling, ready to explode right then and there. Hannibal could play him so easily, like his favorite instrument. He knew Will's body intimately, inside and out, to the point he knew where to press to earn a reaction.

Do you trust me? Hannibal asked, and the question made Will's heart thunder rapidly.

He was asking because something new was to come.

Yes. Will breathed, excitement coursing through his veins. The excitement was only overshadowed by his arousal, the press of Hannibal's body against his own, turning Will into a supernova. He kissed Hannibal again, arms looping around him.

God, he was so beautiful. Will wanted to roll them, to worship his body. His lips longed to brush every piece of skin he could touch, his fingers aching to explore. He wanted the electricity of Hannibal's touch; he wanted the feeling of Hannibal's body against his own. He wanted Hannibal within him so badly he felt empty. He was starving again, aching, and his only reprieve was Hannibal himself.

Hannibal. Hannibal. Hannibal.

Hannibal pulled away from him, making Will whine. He scrambled to pull Hannibal back, claws pressing against soft but not easily pierced flesh. Will tugged him back, and Hannibal relented for a moment, letting their lips collide again.

Will kissed him deeply, the kisses barely enough. He wasn't satisfied. He needed more.

Hannibal pulled away again, gently tugging Will with him. Will let himself be moved until he was lying on his stomach. Hannibal gently soothed over his back, keeping Will from rolling back over.

Will whined and arched into Hannibal's touch, his claws scraping against the ground.

They had flattened the flowers and grass around them, giving them a makeshift nest.

He felt Hannibal move behind him until their bodies were aligned again. Hannibal pressed gentle kiss after gentle kiss to Will's shoulders, peppering his back with them. Will moaned, lifting his head. The action had the fantastic result of tangling their antlers once again.

Will reached for Hannibal desperately, his hand scrambling to cup the back of Hannibal's head and hold him in place.

Was this why Hannibal wanted them in this position? Because of the ease with which their antlers could tangle?

Hannibal hummed, and Will knew it was a confirmation of his question. Will's other hand scrambled against the ground, his cock aching where it was pinned.

Hannibal prepared him slowly, having retrieved the lube they had brought with them at some point. Both knew, without planning it, that they would want each other desperately following Will's transformation. They were insatiable for each other; no single taste was enough. But Will hadn't anticipated that he would still be in his other form for it.

He wasn't protesting at all, especially considering that every touch of Hannibal's served to drive Will mad in this form.

It's mate-specific. Hannibal informed him. *Mates are susceptible to the touch of their mate. It's a biological predisposition.*

Why? Will asked, his body arching as Hannibal brushed his prostate.

So, mates will do what they do best. Mate.

Will laughed at that, his body arching into Hannibal. He knew some part of him should be annoyed that Hannibal's touch had such control over him, but Hannibal always had this effect. He was the only thing in the world that could make Will do anything. Every gentle request, every guiding touch, Will acquiesced to because it was Hannibal who offered it. He would fight gods for Hannibal.

Considering how often the two of them had each other, it really didn't surprise Will that they longed for each other in any form.

Soon, Hannibal's body was covering Will's again, his chest against Will's back.

Will arched into Hannibal, desperately trying to join them. Hannibal didn't make him wait before thrusting into him.

Will's head was thrown back the moment Hannibal was fully seated inside him, making their antlers tangle again.

He nearly came right there. The electricity of Hannibal, the eroticism of their antlers tangling, and the intimacy of being joined were so overwhelming to the point he could barely keep control.

Hannibal thrust slowly, letting Will adjust to the feeling in this new body.

He wasn't going to last; Will knew that for sure. His own overwhelm was driven even further as Hannibal's pleasure began to build, the feeling of it rushing through the bond.

Will groaned and twisted, his body pushed so far that he couldn't keep still. The motions had their antlers knocking.

Hannibal reached a hand up, gently petting over Will's antlers. Will bucked his hips at the feeling, forcing his ass and Hannibal's hips to collide with a loud smack.

Will moaned loudly, the sound echoing off the trees around them.

Hannibal growled. Will felt it echo through his own chest.

Soon, Hannibal's movements sped, every thrust hitting Will's prostate dead on.

Will reached for Hannibal, clawed fingers finding Hannibal's antlers. The next thrust was brutal, making Will see starts.

Hannibal's arm moved forward, the curve of his elbow right under Will's chin, letting him rest his head there.

Had he always had so much muscle?

Will wanted desperately to bite him, to sink his fangs into the bicep next to his cheek.

Don't hold back. Hannibal urged. *You never have to hold back with me. Never have to feel embarrassed or caged. Follow your instincts, my darling.*

That was all the encouragement Will needed as he turned, antlers still knocking against Hannibal's, and bit.

Hannibal groaned loudly in his ear when Will's fangs latched onto his bicep. Hannibal lowered his head, fangs sinking into Will's neck.

They were joined everywhere, hands and arms wrapped around each other, legs tangled together, antlers tangled, and mouths latched onto the other's flesh. And all of that didn't include Hannibal's cock in Will's body, filling him so wholly that Will could feel every thrust in his throat.

Harder. Will demanded. *More.*

Hannibal obeyed, and soon the sounds of skin slapping against skin echoed through the meadow.

Will clawed at the ground, his claws tearing through stems and roots as he scrambled for purchase. His vision became white around the edges with every thrust.

Hannibal reached his other hand forward, finding Will's. Their clawed fingers tangled together as Hannibal continued to fuck the very life from Will's body.

Will knew they were mated already through the bond that thrummed with pleasure between them. But for the first time during sex, he felt *mated.* It was an animalistic coupling, driven more and more by instinct the longer they had each other.

Hannibal growled and snarled over him, his whole body covering Will's so completely.

It took Will a while to realize he was growling and snarling, too, the sounds muffled by his mouth on Hannibal's bicep.

Mine.

Will didn't know who said the word; for all he knew, both of them did, but it rang true. Hannibal was his and only his, and he belonged wholly and utterly to Hannibal.

Mine. Yours.

The words echoed between them, repeated on a loop.

Hannibal's thrusting turned brutal, and Will knew that if he were in his human body, he would have the beginnings of bruises on his ass where Hannibal's hips collided with him.

More. Will pleaded, and Hannibal, perfect Hannibal, gave it to him.

I love you.

I love you too.

Will came with a cry, his vision turning completely white. He knew he bit harder on Hannibal's bicep, drawing blood because he could taste it under the pleasure that danced across his tongue and through his whole body.

Hannibal thrust a few times more before he came, spilling inside Will and claiming him fully.

Every form of Will belonged to Hannibal now, and every form of Hannibal belonged to Will.

Will's vision began to blacken around the edges. Hannibal only barely managed to roll them onto their sides before Will's vision darkened entirely, passing out with Hannibal's cock still within him.

Will stood in his stream, a fishing rod in his hands. He had been here often; he knew this place. This was his quiet place, the place he escaped to when the world became too much. All he needed to do was tilt his head back, close his eyes, and wade into the quiet of the stream.

But something was different this time.

Will looked around him, the stream trickling around his feet. The surroundings were different. While the stream was the same, everything else was new. To Will's right were the same trees where he saw Hannibal for the first time, their branches and leaves frozen in place exactly like they were the day Will first saw his mate.

To the left were bushes and trees and a vine-covered, dome-shaped rock. The bushes and trees around it blocked the stone as though they were hiding something. In fact, Will knew they were hiding something.

He couldn't resist moving closer to that rock, abandoning the fishing rod and stream entirely.

He knew what he would find as he stepped out of the stream; he knew who was waiting for him as he found the secret entrance to the cave.

Will nearly ran down the step-like rocks and parted the vines with a tug.

As he expected, Hannibal was inside the cave. Will saw his antlers before he saw the rest of him.

He was focused on the wall, a rock in hand, while he carved a new drawing. Unlike Hannibal's cave in real life, this cave was covered in pictures that littered the walls and ceiling. Hannibal's brow was furrowed as he focused on his newest drawing, one that would sit right at the head of Hannibal's nest.

"Hannibal," Will breathed, stepping into the cave.

"Will!" Hannibal greeted, dropping the rock immediately and extending his hand toward Will.

Will walked closer and reached for him, their hands quickly tangling. Hannibal tugged him into his nest, gently tucking Will into his side. Will adjusted himself, his head pillowing on Hannibal's arm.

"Will," Hannibal said, then pointed at the drawing he had been working on.

Will turned his head, eyes finding the fresh carving.

It was him, Will realized after a moment. Will was in his new form, the same as Hannibal's true form. His antlers twisted high above his head as he stood, looking somewhere into the distance. Will still had most of his features in this new form; he could see his nose and the curve of his jaw. They weren't the same as Hannibal's sharp features, which were evident in any form he was in.

Will was looking at his wolf form in the drawing, it seemed. He could see the antlers that were still atop his head. Hannibal managed to capture the playfulness in his eyes as he

dropped his front two paws, chest low to the ground but tail high and wagging.

Will turned to look at Hannibal again when he noticed the rest of the drawings around the cave.

They were all of Will. His face covered the walls and ceiling. Sometimes he was smiling, sometimes he was pensive, and sometimes he was asleep, cradled in what was obviously Hannibal's arm.

He saw another drawing, too, not far from Will's head, was a recreation of the picture Freddie Lounds had caught of the two of them locked in a kiss.

Will turned back to Hannibal, his heart in his throat. Hannibal looked at him softly, his hand gently cupping Will's cheek.

"I love you," Will told him.

And I love you, my darling. *Hannibal answered before dipping his head to press a soft kiss to his lips.*

Then he pulled away, making Will whimper. Before he could pull Hannibal back, though, something soft brushed his cheek.

He opened his eyes to find petals raining down on them both, rose petals, carnations, and others from the same blue flower the color of Will's eyes. They covered Will and Hannibal both, a blanket of petals that decorated them as Hannibal turned toward him again, their lips meeting once more.

Will woke in his human form. His body was sore and aching, as though he had worked out every muscle he ever had all at once. Hannibal's arm was draped over his waist, holding him tightly.

At some point, Hannibal had moved them both onto the blanket they brought with them, as the feeling of it soothed Will's burning skin. Hannibal's touch soothed him, too, as the moment he noticed Will awake, he began stroking over his abdomen.

Will forced himself to turn over, readying himself to fall back asleep in his mate's grasp.

I know you want to sleep, my love, but you should eat something. Hannibal told him, still in his true form as he held Will.

"Not hungry," Will grumbled, trying to bury himself against Hannibal.

For me. Hannibal insisted, and Will relented.

Hannibal fed him slowly, the two of them leaning against each other. Will ate whatever Hannibal gave him, his head lolling on Hannibal's shoulder between bites.

Once Hannibal was satisfied with how much Will ate, he gently lowered him back onto the blanket and wrapped Will in his arms once again.

Will forced his arm to wrap around Hannibal's body, the movement feeling Promethean in effort.

Hold me. Will pleaded, tucking himself against Hannibal.

Forever. Hannibal promised.

Will smiled into Hannibal's chest, knowing that their forever had begun the moment they met.

He fell asleep again Hannibal once again, dreaming of their eternity.

Epilogue: The Stag and the Wolf

Chapter Notes

Did I make their anniversary the day I started this fic? Yes, yes I did.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal and Will married on a Tuesday.

At first, Hannibal didn't understand why Will made them wait so long for his species mating ceremonies. He and Will were already mated; they had mated only a couple of months after meeting each other. So, Hannibal was confused initially when Will wanted them to wait.

Will planned the wedding, he called it, for months in the future following his first transition. Hannibal wondered at first if the reason was that he was having second thoughts about the mating bond, the human mating ceremony, or maybe even Hannibal himself.

Will assured him that was not the case and eventually told him when he asked.

"November 3rd," Will said, his voice tight. "It's the day we- it's the day we formed the mating bond."

Hannibal had been overjoyed once he finally learned the reason, and for the first time, it was Will who was nearly attacked in the heat of the moment. Will had grinned like a fool when Hannibal pushed him against the door, ocean eyes playful as Hannibal's lips collided with his.

Now, Hannibal was waiting at the edge of the small tent set up for him to dress before the wedding. Will's tent was set up away from his, a silly human superstition about seeing spouses before weddings keeping them apart. Hannibal paced around his tent often, returning to the mirror to adjust his suit or tie.

Will had protested white at first as they planned their wedding. The wedding itself wasn't that extravagant, and half the attendees were dogs. But even still, some things needed to be arranged ahead of time. They talked about traditional wedding things, debating for days how much of it they wanted to keep and how much they were willing to tolerate.

At one point, Hannibal thought Will would suggest running away and marrying somewhere easier. Eloping, he called it, and Hannibal had to admit the idea had its merits. But for Hannibal, he wanted to be married somewhere those who knew Will would see it. He wanted them to know that Will belonged to him.

Will protested the presence of others at their wedding too. He didn't want the people he worked with invading his personal life, especially when it came to Hannibal.

Hannibal won both arguments, if they were even that, about having white and inviting guests to their wedding. But Will won when it came to the venue and ultimately shortened the guest list to a tolerable amount.

Hannibal wanted the wedding in a church, a place of worship where he could worship his god. But Will wanted nothing to do with a church.

Which was how they found themselves here.

The ceremony and subsequent reception would be held in a larger tent Hannibal could see from his own. They had rented the space for the tent, one that proved to be quite beautiful.

Lights decorated the trees surrounding the tent, evergreens that would continue to stay green even as the temperature dropped. The day itself was moderate, not too cool despite being November. The tent itself had heaters in case it was too cool as the sun dropped. The path leading to the tent had been trimmed, with flowers leading toward the tent's opening.

The inside was decorated with lights of all different colors, which flickered slowly like a fire. It reminded Hannibal of the crystals in his cave with the way the lights danced over the white canvas.

The altar was covered in flowers, carnations, roses, lavender. Will had planned that part precisely, and Hannibal adored him for it.

Hannibal had seen the tent as it started to come together before he was shooed off to dress by Beverly.

Beverly, it turned out, became a vital part of planning the wedding. She helped Will organize the necessities, even finding ways to save money. She also helped Hannibal plan other details like meals, color coordination, and organizing seating. While the tent was large, it wasn't overly spacious, but Beverly seemed to work magic when she put her mind to it. Hannibal understood why Will appreciated her more than most he worked with, and when it came down to choosing who would officiate, Hannibal asked Beverly.

Hannibal adjusted his suit jacket again, staring at the mirror as though it had personally offended him. Everything needed to be perfect because Will deserved perfection.

Of the two of them, it was Hannibal who was wearing the white suit. Under it was a crimson shirt with a red paisley tie. The more he looked at the tie, the more he grew to like it and the patterns on it. He adjusted it in the mirror, smoothing over the suit once again.

He knew Will was wearing a silver suit, much like he wore to the Christmas party, though this suit had a cobalt tie. He had yet to see the suit on Will, but he already knew it would bring out his eyes. Hannibal thought about those eyes as he adjusted his tie once again. He thought about the way they chanced based on Will's mood or the light, a true roiling ocean in those depths. The same color as Will's feathers in his animal form.

Hannibal had spent a lot of time staring at Will in his wolf form. The form fit him so perfectly, Hannibal wondered why he hadn't thought of it before Will changed. Will's wolf

form was easier to fit into the house than Hannibal's stag form, but that did make it easier for the dogs to grow acquainted with that form. Sometimes, Will would curl up against him in his wolf form, demanding attention.

He would be lying if he said they hadn't made love in their animal forms. He had been tempted the first time Will changed, but he wanted to make love to Will's new form, not the animal one. He knew it would be more intense for Will if he were in a form like Hannibal's true form rather than his human or animal body.

Will learned his new forms quickly, faster than Hannibal would have anticipated. Eventually, he could change from his human body into his animal one without an intermediate. Before Will, Hannibal hadn't known that was possible, though it certainly made the days Will wanted to escape for a while a little easier.

Will's shifting between forms no longer hurt him, though Hannibal knew he was always a bit sore when he returned to his human body. As with the first time, Hannibal always held him and fed him when he transformed back, and Will clung to him in return, something not unique to his human form. They were inseparable no matter the form they were in.

Music snapped Hannibal out of his reverie, and soon, his heart began to race with anticipation. He was dying to see Will, and he knew the music meant he would see him soon.

When the music changed, Hannibal recognized his cue to enter the tent. He was at the entrance quickly, walking slower as he reached it. The tent flaps were pulled back so he could enter, and as he stepped inside, he found himself impressed.

Will had planned the decorations in the tent while Hannibal had planned the color coordination of the tables and guests. As Hannibal stepped inside, he knew immediately that Will drew inspiration from his cave. The lights and flowers flickered with reds, purples, whites, oranges, and golds. The lights around the edge of the tent mimicked an ocean, shades of blue blending together. He had to admit it was beautiful. He had a feeling Will had an artistic edge, but this was different than Hannibal's.

Hannibal slowly walked the path to the altar, a trail of pink petals leading the way.

He came to a stop in front of Beverly, who smiled and nodded to where he would be standing to await Will's entrance.

The music faded, and for a heartbeat, there was silence. Then it started up again, a new piece that would usher in Will's entrance.

Hannibal's eyes shot back down the path he recently ventured, his heart racing rapidly as he awaited Will. It had been too long since he'd seen him; he missed him even in the short amount of time they were apart.

Soon, a shadow stretched toward the tent, covering the opening and extending inward. The entrance was opened again, revealing Will on the other side.

Hannibal forgot how to breathe the moment he saw Will. His heart froze in his chest, and the air escaped from his lungs. It took everything in his power to not run to Will right then and take him in his arms.

Will was dressed in a neatly pressed silver suit. The cobalt of his tie lit his eyes beautifully, which seemed to dance in the flickering lights. His hair was carefully tamed atop his head, not a strand out of place. He was beautiful, ethereal.

He seemed nervous as he walked toward Hannibal, alone. Hannibal knew that oftentimes people had someone to walk them down the aisle, but neither he nor Will had anyone. Just each other.

Will seemed to perk up once he finally looked up, finding Hannibal in front of him. Hannibal couldn't stop himself from reaching for Will as he neared, and Will reached back, letting Hannibal guide him the rest of the way toward the altar.

"You look perfect," Hannibal whispered to Will when he came to a stop. Will grinned sheepishly.

Hannibal knew better than to expect a response now. The wedding guests, though few, took a toll on Will already. He knew that combining that with the wedding itself would be enough to stress Will to near breaking.

But Hannibal had him, and if he wanted to run at any moment, Hannibal would go with him.

Beverly began the ceremony, but Hannibal had to admit, he barely paid attention to a word she said. He was far too focused on Will in front of him and the way his mate clutched his hands. He gently nudged Will through their bond, tugging him closer.

It took just a moment for Hannibal to mentally recreate the space they were in, except this time, with no one else. Just them.

Will seemed to ease as he stepped into that place with Hannibal, somewhere only for them.

"...and now, Hannibal and Will have prepared their vows," Beverly said before nodding to Hannibal to begin.

"Will," He said aloud, though the words echoed through their bond. Will's ocean eyes looked at him so earnestly, an open, beautiful look he only ever shared with Hannibal, that he had to take a breath before he could continue. "When I thought about writing this, I began to think of the first time I saw you. I remember you fishing that day and how calm you looked while standing in the water. I thought you were the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

"Since then, I've seen you on hundreds of days. I've seen you in the morning, at night after work, the way you wrinkle your nose sometimes in your sleep. I've seen you furrow your brow when you're frustrated and the eyebrow raises you do in questioning or when you think someone has said something ridiculous. And every time I lay eyes on you, you are somehow more beautiful than the last. I could live a million years, die a million deaths, and I would know your face anywhere. I want nothing more than to spend an eternity looking at you and

to see you each day if you'll have me. I love you, Will Graham, and I offer myself to you in return, knowing that I'm in excellent hands."

Will smiled at him as he spoke, his hands gripping him tighter but now for a different reason. It wasn't his nervousness that drove his grip. It was his happiness.

"Will," Beverly said, indicating his turn.

The next clench of his hands was again of nervousness as he adjusted his grip on Hannibal.

"Oh boy," He muttered before he rolled his shoulders, forcing himself to look at Hannibal. Hannibal smiled softly, and while he resisted the urge to reach out to stroke Will's cheek physically, mentally, he had no such reservations.

"Hannibal," Will began. "I wrote this thing like ten times and threw them all away because, as it turns out, I don't like vows. I don't like people making promises to me that they can't keep, and I don't like making promises in return. People leave, they die, and I have seen more death than I care to admit. I know the impermanence of life, and making a vow seems so permanent. I was alone before I met you, and that taught me that nothing is forever. But then I met you, and you accepted me fully, without asking me to change anything. You saw me, good, bad, and ugly, and you have never asked me to be anything other than me. *You* taught me that while things may not be permanent, the present can burn brightly and that the future isn't something to dread.

"I look forward to the future because of you. Seeing you in the mornings and how you will age. I look forward to the nights spent with you after tough days and the mornings where I wake up in your arms. I've never loved anyone or anything like I love you. And I want a future because I know you'll be in it."

Hannibal smiled, his heart now demanding to leave his chest to reach Will. It didn't belong to him, not anymore. It was Will's, wholly and truly, and it only stayed in Hannibal's chest to pump the blood he would gladly spill at Will's feet in sacrifice.

Beverly spoke once Will finished, and the two of them exchanged the rings they had bought. Before the wedding, Hannibal found a ring for Will, a band the mimicked his own. The rings they exchanged were thinner, silver bands meant to complement the ones they already wore.

"And now," Beverly said the moment after Will fixed the second ring to Hannibal's hand. Hannibal adjusted the rings on Will's fingers idly, turning them between his thumb and forefinger. "I pronounce you husband and husband. You may kiss your spouse," Beverly said with a wink.

Hannibal wasn't surprised when Will dragged him forward, their lips colliding in a short but passionate kiss.

"May I present for the first time, Mr. and Mr. Lecter-Graham," Beverly announced.

Around them, the small audience cheered as Hannibal led Will back down the aisle, their hands linked.

They stepped outside the tent for a moment to allow Will some fresh air while the guests moved from their wedding seats to the reception seats.

"You are amazing, my darling," Hannibal whispered, cupping Will's face for another kiss.

"We can leave now," Will muttered when they parted. "The guests will be happy with the free food. We can go home." *Get an early start on the honeymoon.*

Hannibal smiled. "We should stay for a little while. At least long enough to eat. You're already hungry."

Will groaned while his stomach grumbled, seemingly altered to the presence of food by Hannibal's statement.

"I'll be with you the whole time."

Will nodded, and together the two of them ventured back into the tent.

The reception wasn't nearly as painful as the wedding for Will; Hannibal could tell that right away. Most of the time, he was plastered to Hannibal's side, a drink in hand and one arm on Hannibal the whole time.

"Shame Freddie Lounds couldn't be here," Zeller commented sarcastically, milling nearby with Beverly and Price at his sides.

"Shame indeed," Will muttered into his glass, sharing a secret smile with Hannibal when their eyes caught.

Freddie Lounds had been found weeks ago, torn apart as if by a wild animal. Technically, it was a wild animal, as Will, in his wolf form, had torn her apart with ease. The only thing that could potentially give away the fact that it wasn't an animal was Lounds's missing heart. Will told Hannibal his surprise at finding a heart in her chest before offering that same heart to Hannibal with blood still on the maw of his wolf. Will's DNA was nowhere on Freddie, a surprising find for them both.

The reception didn't last long, as so few people didn't manage to linger for long.

Will sighed with relief the moment they were headed home, and Hannibal was happy to find his mate, and now husband, wasn't too tired from the day to begin their honeymoon activities.

FBI Consultant Still Missing: Husband Only Suspect

No Leads in Controversial Journalist Frederica Lounds Murder Case

Georgetown Professor and FBI Consultant Alana Bloom Found Murdered in Her Home

General Administrator for the Baltimore State Hospital in Critical Condition Following Severe Burns

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Several Years Later

The hunter had hunted in these woods for years. Never before had he come across anything new. His father taught him to hunt in these woods; he taught his daughter to hunt in these woods. He taught his daughter how to honor her kills and use every part of the animal. He taught her how to make clothing and rugs and pillows and lampshades from the animals. Nothing was left unused.

His kills had grown as his daughter did, and soon he began to hunt other things. Because the thing he wanted the most, the thing he was desperate to keep at his side, he could not harm. So, he hunted others, killed them so he wouldn't hurt his most precious possession.

And now, she was off at university, and he was hunting again.

Needless to say, it was a surprise when he came across the deer and the wolf in the woods. Such animals rarely ever spent time around one another, and the only other time wolves found deer was for food. But when he came across this particular pair, he froze in place.

At first, the hunter thought he had come across a wolf after a kill. His brain first supplied the explanation when he saw the stag lying on the ground in a patch of sun. But as he looked closer, he noticed the wolf was also lying on its side, focused intently on some task.

The stag was still alive, its breathing steady and eyes closed, something it wouldn't normally do around a predator.

As the hunter watched, he noticed the wolf was gently licking the stag, its tongue tracing over one spot on its neck over and over.

Over feathers.

The hunter thought he was seeing things as he looked at the stag, but as he looked at the wolf, he realized it too had feathers. Then the wolf shifted, turning its attention further down the stag's neck and the hunter saw the antlers that stood tall atop its head.

The hunter retreated quickly, fear coursing through his veins at the sight before him. He couldn't explain it, and quite frankly, he didn't want to. Maybe he had stumbled on some old gods, or maybe he had gone insane following the loss of his most precious person. Either way, he didn't want to stick around to see what would happen.

In his haste, the hunter didn't notice the twig until he stepped on it, snapping it under his boot.

He froze, one hand on the gun hung around his shoulder and the other covering his mouth, hoping the creatures behind him hadn't noticed. Yet as he turned, the hairs on the back of his neck rose.

One of the creatures was gone, the wolf no longer carefully licking over the stag's neck. Instead, there was a human-like creature with oily black skin, pale white eyes, long sharp claws, and severe, sharp fangs. The creature was crouched in front of the stag, and while it had no irises, the hunter knew it was staring right at him.

The creature — or was it a beast? — bared its teeth at the hunter, crouching lower.

The hunter knew he had to run, and he turned away to do just that, but as he did, his brain cried out, some instinctual part of him telling him he was going to die.

The last thing the hunter saw was a spurt of red that contrasted darkly with the green of the evergreens in front of him. Fangs sunk into his neck, the pain sharp and terrifying as his head lolled back, staring at the blue sky but knowing nothing of it.

He died before he touched the ground.

Will snarled as he crouched over his prey, looking for anyone who could be with the hunter who stumbled upon them. He knew it was an accident, but the moment Will saw the gun, he knew the hunter couldn't be allowed to live. What if he came back? What if he brought more hunters?

Now, that didn't matter as the hunter's dead body lay at Will's feet, no longer a threat to him or, more importantly, Hannibal.

Hannibal huffed behind him, still in his stag form and obviously perturbed at being interrupted.

Will snarled again, backing away from the hunter and toward Hannibal, eyes darting everywhere to detect the flash of the barrel of a gun. He only settled when he didn't hear an unusual heartbeat around them, only Hannibal's, the several heartbeats below them, and the thundering hearts of the birds and small mammals he had disturbed in his frenzy.

When he was certain there was no one else, he moved back toward the body, his claws easily tearing open the chest.

He tugged the heart free and crawled back toward Hannibal, offering it in his cupped hands. It was one of many hearts shared between them, but that never diminished the meaning behind them.

Hannibal shifted, changing back into his true form as he knelt with Will, cupping his hands under Will's.

Together. He said, reminding Will of the night Hannibal had given him Tier's heart. They shared the heart that night too, and as Hannibal bit into this one from one side, Will bit into the other.

Soon, it was gone, and their lips met in frantic, bloody kisses, the taste of the hunter still fresh on their tongues.

Will tugged Hannibal closer, drawing their bodies up until their chests touched.

I wish you could have seen yourself. Hannibal murmured. *You were beautiful.*

He could have hurt you. Will answered, dragging Hannibal closer still.

My lovely mate. Hannibal uttered, sounding awed. *My ethereal, protective god.*

Will whined and broke their kiss to bury his face in Hannibal's neck, inhaling deeply. Hannibal held him for a moment, their antlers tangling above them. Will moaned, gripping Hannibal tighter.

We should deal with your gift, beloved, first. Then I'll have you as you deserve.

Will wanted to argue that they could have each other now, but it wouldn't do any good to have animals stumbling on a fresh kill.

Together, they ran the body far away, depositing it in the ocean before they were back.

Hannibal grasped Will when they arrived, tugging him into his arms, hooking one behind Will's knees. Will grinned as Hannibal carried him down the hidden steps and through the vine curtain that separated their home from the rest of the world.

The dogs perked up when they entered, coming closer to sniff them both before deciding they weren't interesting enough and returning to their beds.

Hannibal gently lowered him to the ground then pulled him into another embrace. Will sighed in Hannibal's arms, closing his eyes as he rested on Hannibal's shoulder.

Their home had evolved since Hannibal first showed it to Will. It had all happened rather quickly, as one day, Will decided he was tired of the life he had been living. Together, he and Hannibal packed up most of their house, taking the dogs, their beds, some bedding, some sentimental objects they had accumulated along the way, and some clothing before abandoning the house entirely. They carried the various things from their car to the cave before leading the dogs there.

The dogs acclimated quickly to the cave, and soon, it was challenging to make them leave.

Hannibal and Will abandoned the car somewhere and then ran back to the cave, racing each other the whole way.

That had been some years ago; Will had lost track of time for the most part. Except for one day. There was one day Will always knew, no matter what.

Come with me, my darling. Hannibal coaxed after a minute, carefully luring him into the warm pool.

Will sighed on entry before stepping closer to Hannibal again, foreheads touching and antlers tangling. They held each other as that familiar tingling feeling ran through them both.

They slowly cleaned each other up, washing the blood from their bodies and mouths before holding each other again. Will didn't even realize they were moving when they began, Hannibal gently tugging them until they were spinning slowly, dancing in the water.

Will sighed against Hannibal, their hands tangling as they swayed and spun, heartbeats perfectly aligned.

When Hannibal tugged them from the water, Will's mind felt sluggish and fuzzy. He was grateful for the feeling; it was rare his brain was silent.

"Will," Hannibal said, forcing Will's eyes open.

Hannibal greeted him in his human form, and soon, Will shifted back, holding Hannibal against him the whole time.

"Come, my love," Hannibal beckoned, taking them toward their nest.

The nest had grown too since they arrived; extra padding added to it for comfort. The blanket the two of them slept on top of was the same blanket Will had given Hannibal years ago.

Hannibal gently laid Will down in the bed, guiding them, so their bodies were aligned.

"I believe you were after something earlier," Hannibal reminded him, drawing his mind back to the task he was focused on earlier before they were interrupted.

Will grinned and shuffled closer, pressing a quick kiss to Hannibal's lips before returning to his neck. It was easier to have what he was after in this form as he latched his mouth to Hannibal's neck, sucking in the same place he had once bitten to form the mating bond. Hannibal moaned, one hand coming to the back of his head to cradle it, holding Will in place.

Will worked on his neck for a while, sucking a dark bruise to Hannibal's flesh.

Once he was finished, Hannibal turned them, giving him access to the side of Will's neck he had once bitten before sucking a bruise of his own, marking Will once again.

Will sighed at the feeling, his eyes falling shut and his hand gently stroking Hannibal's hair.

Once he was done, Hannibal leaned back, the two of them cuddling close together in their nest.

"Happy Anniversary," Will whispered, still feeling the rings on his hand.

"Happy Anniversary, my darling," Hannibal whispered back, capturing Will's lips in another kiss.

The two of them curled close together, bodies touching everywhere they could and hands roaming. In their joined mind palaces, Hannibal twirled Will around their former home, which was located behind the waterfall and crystal cavern in their cave.

Will smiled physically and mentally as he gripped his mate, drifting somewhere between awake and asleep as Hannibal held him into their eternity.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for the lovely comments. This fic has been so fun to write and I hope it was just as fun for you to read. Your kind words and kudos kept me going and encouraged me to write even on the bad days.
Happy Holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, or anything else you want to celebrate and I'll see you all in the next one.
-NW14
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End Notes

Feel free to come yell at me on Tumblr!

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